

The Reclaimer Effect: First Contact

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Category: Halo, Mass Effect

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-05-26 16:03:25

Updated: 2014-08-07 19:19:24

Packaged: 2016-04-27 05:02:51

Rating: T

Chapters: 4

Words: 24,272

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Humanity thought that they were done with war when the Human-Covenant War ended. They were wrong. It only heralded a new age of wars larger and more brutal than before. A humanity used to war meets the Citadel Council, a coalition of alien races that haven't seen war in millennia, thinking themselves secure in their position of power. The Reclaimers, though, may just change that.

1. Hello Mass Relays

EDITED AND UPDATED!

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><p>"We are who we choose to be."- General James Raynor, 'Raynor's Raiders,' New Terran Alliance Marine Corps

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><p>Bridge, RMS (Reclaimer Military Starship) Moscow
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC (Reclaimer Standard Calendar): March 11, 2614

Raymond Carver was born as the only child of the deceased Commodore Richard Carver and the retired Captain Elena Carver. At the age of thirty-four, he was one of the few naval officers within the human fleets to not have seen much war. The hardened outlook that most humans had on the universe had not affected him much, and so he was far more peaceful than other captains.

Which, in hindsight, was both good and bad.

Good, because he could think in a levelheaded manner. Bad, because peacefulness had no place in a war-torn galaxy.

There was a reason why Carver and his command, the RMS _Moscow_, had

been assigned to this mission. It was expected to be simple, out of the combat zone with little to no risks. After all, they were towards the galactic 'east' of Reclaimer territory, far away from the Sangheili Imperium, Jiralhanae Empire, Zerg Swarm, or any of the battlefronts and conflict zones.

Since they were far away from the battlefronts, there was little need for a heavy military presence. The Moscow was a Whitcomb-class Cruiser, with a length of 1.5 kilometers, a height of 600 meters and a width of 520 meters. It was covered in thick Titanium-F Battle Plating, and was extremely resistant to heat or projectile damage (the former was more focused on given that the Reclaimers' enemies loved energy weapons), along with a relatively strong energy shield-sure, it was nothing compared to the Infinity-class Battle Carriers, or the Cortana-class Battleships, or, god forbid, the Cole-class Dreadnoughts, but it packed a strong punch, considering that it had one Forerunner Beam and two MACs, in addition to Linchpin Kinetic/Energy Turrets.

The Moscow had four escorts here, all of them being Keyes-class Frigates, the most numerous Reclaimer navy warship, due to its modularity, reliability, individual hitting power and design. At a respectable 650 meters in length, 200 meters in width and 250 meters in height, these frigates had energy shields, Titanium-F Battle Plating, Linchpin Kinetic/Energy Turrets, and a single MAC. Small potatoes compared to the Cruisers, but it was more than enough for repelling minor incursions and pirates.

Along with the five military vessels, there was a single civilian science vessel, the Curious Flames.

Which led to the reason for the vessels being here in the first place. A scant three days ago, a civilian scout ship scanning an unexplored system found traces of an artificial construct on the outer reaches of the system, seemingly dormant. Word was soon passed to the local Military Post in the nearby Shanxi colony, which was the only world with a population higher than fifteen million in the entire sector (the rest being only mining, farming or scientific outposts).

In the end, the RMS Moscow and four other frigates had been spirited away from the Shanxi Cluster Fleet (composed of the 27th Fleet, 24th and 26th Patrol Flotillas), and assigned to oversee and guard the scientists for the duration of the mission.

All in all, boring as hell.

Captain Carver sighed as he reviewed the briefing packet once more, out of sheer boredom if anything. The mug of hot coffee- real coffee, not the synthesized crap that the navy had the gall to call coffee-fitted snugly in the cup holder of his command seat, the aroma keeping him awake. The XO of the ship, Commander Victoria Denton, had been eyeing the coffee jealously, having to make do with the ship's synthesized versions, but Carver had not noticed.

A yawn threatened to escape him, but he clamped down on it. Boring or not, he had to set an example for the crew to follow, at the very least.

Bringing the mug to his lips, and enthusiastically taking in the

brown nectar, Carver silently sighed contently.

At least there's coffee.

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><p>RSS (Reclaimer Science Starship) Curious Flames
_Theta
Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC (Reclaimer Standard Calendar): March 11,
2614

Contrary to the bleak and bored state of the _Moscow_ and the military starships, the scientists aboard the _Curious Flames_ had an aura of excitement, trepidation, and well, curiosity, in them. The crew, thoughâ€|

Captain Kevin Barnes blinked his eyes and stifled the yawn that had threatened to materialize. He was a veteran of the Zerg War, which had by now simmered down into the Brood Conflicts. After losing his left arm to a nasty Zergling in an unfortunate boarding attempt by the Zerg Swarm during the Battle of Tarsonis, Barnes was honorably discharged from the Reclaimer Star Navy and entered the private sector, ending as the captain of the _Curious Flames._

To be sure, the pay was good, and the risks were lowâ€|most of the time. What the _Flames_ essentially amounted to was a glorified transport, with some expensive sensors, upgraded civilian/military energy shields and practically nonexistent armor. Then again, this was in comparison to the military warships Barnes had served on, and considering that one of them was a heavily armored Cortana-class Battleshipâ€|well, it wasn't a fair comparison.

Usually, though, Barnes would think very little of it. His job was relatively low-risk. It wasn't like pirates were much of an issue within Ascendancy space- heavy patrols of marauding warships tended to make piracy a very short career for any idiot who chose to go into that line of work.

This artifact, though, it gave him the creeps. And when something gave him the creeps, Barnes would take stock of the situation, and see what assets he had on hand.

Truth be told, the _Flames_ wasn't in very good condition. The engineers (not the biological supercomputers) in the crew had done a great job in regards to engine and drive core maintenance, but there was little anyone could do about old parts. The shielding systems, for example, were only running at fifty percent capacity, and those shields had always been relatively weak from before, which meant that he could not count on that to pull the _Flames_ out of a bind. Armor? There was practically no armor, since it wasn't very economical for a glorified transport. Barnes couldn't count on that too. Hell, the only things he could count on were speed and agility. They were due for maintenance at Shanxi, but the artifact's recent revelation caused the postponing of that, as they were the only marginally equipped science team in the region.

Barnes would have mentally sighed at that, were it not for the fact that it wouldn't have changed anything.

It wasn't everyday that they got to examine a new alien artifact,

especially one as large as this. To be sure, it did not compare to the Halos or the Ark, but the fact that it made the _Moscow_ seem tiny was enough to incite excitement within the scientists, who were used to teeny tiny palm-sized artifacts.

Those artifacts were usually of Forerunner origin as well, and though they were still regarded as technological gods, their artifacts had lost some of their novelty over time. This, though, this was NEW.

It was from a new alien race, one that most likely predated even the Forerunners, which, in itself, seemed like a rather amazing achievement to Doctor Amanda Chang.

She was only twenty-four, but had already become a prodigy within the ranks of the scientific community, gaining widespread recognition for her work regarding Xel'Naga artifacts found by their long lost Terran cousins in the Koprulu sector.

Mentored by the famed Terran scientist/leader/doctor Ariel Hanson, Chang was on her first job where she would be leading the team instead of just being another member of it (her previous postings were as subordinates, not leaders).

The _Curious Flames_ was a rather small ship, an Inquisitive-class Science Vessel, to be specific. At a diminutive 200 meters in length, 70 meters in height and width, it served as one of the favorite ships for the Reclaimer science community, due to the fact that it had good sensors and was fast enough to get science teams to places they needed to be at fast, all the while carrying the gear needed for the aforementioned scientists.

Being only a scant fifty or so meters away from the artifact, it was clear why the ship's crew were fidgety and uncomfortable. This was an _alien_ artifact, after all, and no one had the slightest idea on what its function was. For all they knew, it could have been a hyped-up NOVA-class bomb—or a mere decoration. Who knows, right?

The Bridge of the _Curious Flames_ was filled with activity, with scientists at various posts alongside the crew of the ship, who were manning the systems that were essential to run the ship.

Scans of the artifact had revealed very little— all that was known was that whatever the artifact was made of, it could have probably withstood the guns of an entire Ascendancy fleet—probably. An ODP-class S-MAC could have probably destroyed it, but no known ship in the universe could withstand ODPs—except the Forerunner ships—and that was only a maybe, since the _Mantle's Approach_ was a special type of warship, custom built for the now-dead Didact. Even then, the ODPs' guns had barely hit the _Approach_, so no one really knew its shield strength.

That, however, mattered very little to Doctor Amanda Chang. She was a scientist, one that focused on aliens. While the military applications of synthesizing such a material was clear even to her, Chang had no interest in that, wanting to instead know _who_ created the artifact in the first place.

Which was why the lack of progress for the past two days had begun grating on her nerves.

"Einstein, give me a rundown on what exactly have we _not attempted?" she finally snapped out to the _Flames'_ onboard science oriented AI, who was based on the German-born American theoretical physicist that won great acclaim during his time.

"To be honest, Doctor, there is very little I can do here," the AI replied, his hard-light orange body, projected through a pedestal, showing a confused and exasperated face.

A new member of the science team, one of the students from the Colonial University of Shanxi, suddenly blurted out. "We could send it a transmissionâ€|"

The university student trailed off at the end, his cheeks turning slightly red. It was, after all, a blind shot into the dark.

Instead of dismissing it, though, Doctor Chang just gave a nonchalant shrug that spelled 'meh, why the hell not' to everyone onboard.

Einstein obliged her unspoken request immediately, sending a burst transmission in radio- the most basic form, since they did not know what the artifact's creators used.

Again, it was a blind shot into the dark.

Fate, though, seemed to be toying with them today.

"Activity detected!" shouted a crewman who was operating the sensors station, filled with alarm.

"Dark energy burst detectedâ€|strange, most strangeâ€|" Einstein rambled, the frazzled hair and partly insane look in his eyes doing nothing to alleviate the concerns of the crew.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed a crewman as he turned to look out the window. The artifact, which was shaped like a tuning fork/Covenant energy sword (it depended on who you were asking) with a previously dormant core and unmoving rings, now did not look at all inactive.

It was the opposite. The rings began to spin, and a bluish glow began appearing in the 'core' of the spinning rings.

The captain of the _Flames_, whose name Chang had not bothered to remember, then barked to his crew.

"Get us out of here! Helmsman, move it!"

The comparatively miniscule ship lurched forward, before it all went to hell. An electric blue tendril reached out from the core to latch onto the shipâ€|and then they were gone.

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><p>Combat Information Center (CIC), THW (Turian Hierarchy Warship)
Palaven Sun
_Dasniore System
>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Senior Captain Adrien Victus was _not _having a good day. First, he

was sent on a patrol with the 25th Patrol Fleet to watch over the outer reaches of Council-controlled space. Specifically, the Stillborn Region. It was called that because of the fact that a mere two days before the Mass Relays in the region were supposed to be opened, the Rachni War began. After that, any plans to open the relays had been scrapped, leaving businesses that had set up there in expectation of an economic boom to go bust and pullout. Since the economic gains of the area were never realized, the region of space became known as the Stillborn Region.

Still, his mood was not because of that. He was a Turian, dammit, and keeping the galaxy safe- no matter how boring- was a duty of his race. The crew of the 25th Patrol Fleet would have felt the same, due to the discipline instilled in them since birth. Sure, they would all have jumped at a chance for shore leave, but they would not complain.

Victus had no complaints regarding the 25th either. They were good at their jobs, disciplined, and reliable- as a Turian fleet should have been.

No, his problems laid with, pardon the language, the Asari bitch that thought she could order them around. The Asari Republics had finally begun picking up the slack in regards to security issues, finally doing joint patrols with the Hierarchy Navy. Like many Turians, Victus had initially treated the news with a 'finally' kind of feeling.

The fact that his fleet was one of the units being assigned to a joint patrol had gladdened him in the start. While the Turians may have had the most warships and dreadnoughts, the Asari had the most powerful shields and weapons, in no part due to their tech superiority. It was not a truly noticeable gap, but an Asari dreadnought under the command of a competent commander could theoretically defeat two turian Dreadnoughts. Theoretically. So yes, Victus was happy with more ships for him to fight alongside.

The Asari fleet elements would be under the command of a Fleet Commander Arliya Sederis, a name that had been uncannily familiar to Victus. Hierarchy Fleet Command had told him that Sederis would have overall command of the Joint Patrol Fleet 'Theta,' as it was called. Their first meeting had Victus leaving with a sinking feeling in his gut, as the arrogant tone of the Asari had rubbed him the wrong way. She spoke in a condescending tone to Victus, as if she believed she was superior. When he returned to his ship, Victus did the natural thing. He checked the extranet, searching for 'Sederis.'

It then struck him why the name was familiar. Arliya Sederis was the daughter of Matriarch Ilya Sederis and older sister of Jenra Sederis, the leader of House Sederis and the CEO of the Eclipse Private Security Force respectively. The former had assets worth billions, if not trillions of credits, owning multiple companies, most of them being arms manufacturers, or anything related to war material. The latter- well, she owned the largest mercenary company in Citadel space, only closely matched by the savage Blood Pack in the Terminus.

Further prodding to a few friends from his days in the academy got him information he needed, and needless to say, he was not impressed.

Arliya Sederis had scored terribly in the Naval Academy, only to have her grades suddenly bump very high near the end of the semester. It was very, very clear that this was nepotism at its best, something that Victus, and Turians in general, hated. In addition to all of that, he had an ominous feeling in his gut, as if something bad was going to happen.

Of course, a good Turian doesn't question orders. He follows them.

Which led to his current predicament, sitting in the Command Chair of the THW Palaven Sun, a Taetrus-class Cruiser. Like all citadel member states' navies, the Turian Hierarchy had four ship classes. The first was the Nimble-class corvettes. They were not made for combat, only for insertion of strike teams and scouting duties, though the frigates were phasing them out.

The next class was the Kava-class frigate, named after an ancient Turian war hero. They had a small mass accelerator cannon, capable of taking down cruisers only if they were in wolfpacks of five. With an advanced GARDIAN array, they had the duty of being the picket ships in a fleet, as well as scouting ahead, along with anti-missile and the occasional but rare anti-fighter duty. Ships of this class were 200 meters long, and were the most numerous in the Hierarchy Navy.

The Taetrus-class cruiser was the second-most common ship in the Hierarchy Navy, at 500 meters length. A spinal-mounted mass accelerator allowed for substantial firepower, allowing it to easily take down frigates and other cruisers.

Then you had the Valor-class Dreadnoughts, at a solid eight hundred meters of length. They were amongst the most powerful warships in Citadel and Terminus Space, the Hierarchy having 38 of them. They made up the core of a Battle Fleet, of which Victus' fleet was not. As such, his flagship was a Taetrus-class cruiser, adequate enough for his tasks.

"Scans complete, Senior Captain," reported a crewman. "Relay 313A confirmed inactive, no activity in the system. The Sunset Hazel reports the same."

The Sunset Hazel- a weird name for a warship, in Victus' opinion- was the flagship of the combined fleet, a Tevura-class Dreadnought. It was supposedly a show of force from the Asari, who were beginning to be painted as 'weak, foolish and easily killed' by the Terminus' inhabitants. The Tevura-class was one of the older Asari designs, but it easily outranged any other ship in the fleet, due to their sheer length, an impressive nine hundred meters. This particular dreadnought was from the Thessian Space Fleet, easily the most powerful of the many Asari 'navies.' The Asari did not really spend much on their military when compared to other races. Even if they did spend as much, it would have been imbalanced, as there was no Asari High Command.

It was baffling for Turians, but then again, they were a different species.

"Orders from Fleet Commander Sederis, sir!" reported another crewman

with a salute as he gave Victus the datapad.

Victus scanned it for a brief second, before ordering his crew.
"Prepare for FTL jump to Saviorne System, they want us to check on Relay 314A."

"Understood, Senior Captain!" complied the crew, before the ship jumped into FTL.

A routine jumpâ€|right?

Somehow, the bad, sinking feeling got even worse.

* * *

><p>Bridge, ARS (Asari Republics Ship) Sunset Hazel
_Entering Saviorne System
>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Fleet Commander Arliya Sederis gave an unprofessional yawn as she dropped herself on the self-styled Command Throne that she had brought along with her. It was made of Thessian Cyan Marble, extremely rare and expensive, equal to a five decades' worth of pay for a Fleet Commander. For someone of the Sederis name, though, that was nothing, a mere drop in a massive ocean of money.

The Executive Officer of the ship, Ship Commander Riena Vasil, gave a bow to Sederis before making her report.

"Fleet Commander Sederis, ma'am, we're on the way to the Saviorne System, to check on Relay 314."

Sederis merely waved her off, a bored expression on her face. A few seconds later, an Asari in a naval uniform entered the Bridge, carrying a steaming crystal cup of _hariente_, an Asari drink that was commonly consumed by the wealthy. She carefully placed in on the velvet cup holder on the Throne, before stepping back.

The Fleet Commander merely lifted the cup to her lips, before spitting out the drink. She turned to glare at the shocked crewwoman.

"Are you an idiot? You added too much sweetener into this, you blithering fool! Are you high on drugs, you Goddess-damned filth?" she screamed at the now-cowering Asari. Had this been any other Fleet Commander, a court-martial would have been in order. Doing that to a member of House Sederis, especially the heiress, though, was not going to work.

"I-I apologize, Fleet Commander-"

She did not get a chance to continue, before Sederis punched her in the face. She then glared at the nearest Asari. "You! Bring this imbecile to the brig and let her spend an entire day there, with only water. Have another crewwoman take her place."

The Asari merely nodded, before speaking. "Your wisdom continues to astonish me, milady-"

"Shut up!" Sederis barked, before sitting down in her Throne.

The pitiful Asari was then carried to the brig of the dreadnought. Some of the newer members of the crew had shock written all over their face, but the more experienced ones just ignored it to the best of their abilities. There was a reason why Fleet Commander Sederis was reviled and feared, after all. She had one thing in common with a Spectre. Laws did not extend to her.

* * *

><p>CIC, THW Palaven Sun
_Saviorne System

>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

The blue-shift of Element Zero heralded the arrival of the combined patrol fleet, a total of forty-one warships (thirty turian ships, eleven asari). The crews of the ships began carrying out standard operating procedure for such a patrol, scanning the system.

Victus, who had been expecting another boring day, merely sat in his chair, his talons tapping the armrests in a rhythmic pattern.

"Scans completeâ€|wait. That can't be rightâ€|" muttered the sensors operator.

"What is it, Ensign?" prodded Victus as the Ensign began frantically rechecking the sensor arrays.

"Uh, Relay 314A isâ€|active, according to the sensors," the Ensign reported.

"Are you sure?" Victus asked, a slight hint of panic rising within him.

"I've rechecked three times already, the results are still the same!" the Ensign exclaimed, getting fidgety.

"Consult with the Asari, and the other ships," ordered Victus, before thinking.

'If it really is active, then either someone broke citadel law, or we're looking at a first contact here.'

"_Sunset Hazel _and other ships all report similar- relay activity detected, I think there's a ship coming through!" the sensors operator was now getting truly excited, though nervousness was evident in his voice.

"Standby, ready all weapons, but HOLD FIRE," Victus announced, before turning to the communications officer. "Relay those orders to the fleet, we may have a First Contact on our hands."

* * *

><p>Changes Seen:<p>

Sederis is less of a bitch, though still bitchy.

It takes place in 2614, only sixty-two years after the HCW and fifty-seven years after the heavily edited Requiem Events (for one,

the Didact died after multiple rockets, grenades and massed firepower from dozens of S-IVs, the Chief and Marines).

No Neo Covenant. I decided to make some changes to their role.

For those who are not aware of what exactly the Zerg are, I will give a brief explanation.

You see the Flood? Horrible, yes? Now imagine a species with nearly the same qualities:

Led by an Overmind (equivalent to a Gravemind)

One Zerg drone (a worker unit) can cause the infestation of an entire world

Canonically caused the deaths of their 'God-Race,' which was the Xel'Naga, while the Flood did the same to the Forerunners and Precursors. A difference is that the Xel'Naga altered the Zerg, which caused their violent nature.

On top of that, the Zerg assimilate desirable qualities of other species that they infest. For example, the Zergling, the basic Zerg foot soldier, is adapted from the Zz'gashi Dune Runner, which gives it the terrifying speed at which they can move at. One could say that the Zerg are worse than the Flood because of this- the Flood infest a creature, but they don't (as far as I know, I might be wrong though) have the capabilities to repeatedly clone that creature once they assimilate its genetic code. Unlike the Flood, some Zerg can move in the vacuum of space. Zerg do not infest starships to control them like the Flood do- they grow the damned starships. Flood cannot burrow underground and swim through it- Zerg can. The good news is that the Zerg aren't very good at fortifying planets, and technology can still beat them, so long as there are substantial numbers behind the technology.

In short, the Zerg are as bad as, or worse, than the Flood. Luckily there's a much less Zerg than Flood (well, during the Forerunner-Flood War, that is).

2. Baptism By Mass Accelerator

EDITED AND UPDATED

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><p>Previously, on the Reclaimer Effect:<p>

"_Standby, ready all weapons, but HOLD FIRE," Victus announced, before turning to the communications officer. "Relay those orders to the fleet, we may have a First Contact on our hands."_

* * *

><p>"This is for the record. History is written by the victor. History is filled with liars. If he lives, and we die, his truth becomes written- and ours is lost. Shepherd will be a hero, 'cause all you need to change the world is one good lie and a river of blood. He's about to complete the greatest trick a liar ever played on

history. His truth will be the truth. But only if he lives, and we die."- Cpt. John Price, TF141 (Disavowed), former British SAS, participant in Third World War

* * *

><p>RSS Curious Flames
_Unknown System
>Unknown Spiral Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Loud cursing was easily heard within the bridge of the _Curious Flames_ as the shuddering continued. Though only a few seconds had passed, it sure as hell felt like an eternity to Doctor Amanda Chang, who had her hand clutched over a cross, and eyes clenched shut.

Then, the shuddering stopped. Chang gingerly opened her eyes, expecting the worst-

But those fears were unfounded, except for a few cuts and bruises. The frazzled looking captain, who was just picking himself up, then looked to Chang.

"What the hell just happened?" he demanded, glaring at Chang and the scientists.

"â€|Curious, most curiousâ€|ah, yesâ€|I seeâ€|" they were interrupted by Einstein's rambling.

Taking in a deep breath, Chang replied in a tone that she hoped was calm. "I don't know. We sent that transmission- well, Einstein sent the transmission- and then suddenly the artifact went active, and here we are!"

"Doctor, Captain," Einstein interrupted them, now no longer rambling. "If I may have your attention, please?"

The two then turned to Einstein with expectant looks on their faces.

"The star charts we have just collected show that we are approximately 2500 hundred light years from the Theta Habilis System, and scans we took once we entered this system has an identical artifact as the one that sent us here, also in a dormant state."

Comprehension dawned on both their faces. "Soâ€|it's like an FTL catapult?" asked the captain.

Einstein nodded, now excited. "Yes, it is! It transported us two thousand and five hundred light years in a blink of an eye, far faster than slipspace! When we sent the message to the artifact, it activated, and had we sent the message correctly, if I am translating this right, there should have been no shuddering."

"Explain," the two barked at the same time.

"We were supposed to send our mass for the ship, but we didn't, so instead of a smooth transition, we had the uncomfortable and taxing move," Einstein explained further. "The data was sent to me mere seconds before the catapult sent us here, and it was in binary-

Captain, we have unknown ship signatures entering the system, what little scans we did are inconclusive!"

"First Contact?" the captain said, a feeling of dread washing over him.

"It appears so, since the ships do not match any known signatures, and are not organic." The last part calmed the crew down a bit, since the newcomers definitely weren't Zerg or the Flood.

"Comm., prepare the First Contact Package!" ordered the Captain in a tone that would brook no argument. "Raise shields, and begin preparations to go through the relay again."

"Sir!" acknowledged the communications officer.

The captain turned to smile grimly at the scientists, hoping that this First Contact would be peaceful.

"Let's go meet our new neighbors, shall we?"

* * *

><p>Bridge, ARS Sunset Hazel
_Saviorne System

>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Arliya Sederis had joined the Thessian Space Fleet out of boredom, since there wasn't much for an heiress of one of the richest Asari Houses to do. Her connections had ensured that though she behaved poorly during her time at the Thessian Academy of Naval Sciences, nothing had happened to her. It would, after all, look very bad for such an esteemed member of Asari society to be expelled from training due to her inability to follow orders and bad behavior. In the end, her scores had dropped so low that she was almost definitely going to fail TANS, which was when her mother, Matriarch Ilya Sederis, had stepped in.

A reduction of fifty million credits was barely noticed due to the sheer size of the House Sederis bank accounts, and no one had dared to investigate a movement of such a sum of money when it originated from House Sederis, which had been reputed to have no qualms in violently causing a mysterious 'disappearing' for those who tried to investigate them. Only Spectres could do so, and financial crimes were, to the Spectres, hardly worthy of their attention.

She graduated a few months later as Ensign Arliya Sederis, officer of the Thessian Space Fleet, one of the major forces within the unofficial 'Asari Navy.'

From then on, her family name alone ensured that even officers with the rank of Fleet Commander did not want to mess with her. In Asari society, gaining the favor of a Matriarch, especially one from the Great Houses like T'Soni or Sederis, was considered to be the easiest path to rise in prominence. Officers would curry favor with Sederis just because of her family name, and write glowing reports regarding her even though she barely pulled her weight within the Space Fleet. Twenty years of continued promotions due to nepotistic reasons ended up with her becoming a Fleet Commander, a rank that would later be revealed to be similar in authority to a Vice Admiral in the

Reclaimer Star Navy.

Unlike what they loved to proclaim, the Asari Republics- supposedly an e-democracy- had the tendency of being the public face of the more obscure Matriarch Council. They were composed of Matriarchs, usually from the more prominent Houses. These Matriarchs are greatly respected by the Asari in general, and the advice of a Matriarch, no matter how foolish it sounds, is usually listened to- after all, they must have learned much in their eight to nine centuries of life, right?

These Houses were spread into two camps. The Upper Houses, seen as the royalty due to their staggering wealth and power (both in biotic and economic, and in some cases, military power), often heavily influence Asari politics. There are five Upper Houses- T'Soni, Tevos, Sederis, T'Lora, and Dantius. Houses with the 'T' prefix are the Old Houses, which have been part of the Upper Houses ever since pre-spaceflight. Only two remain in existence, the rest having been wiped out by various means. Houses Tevos, Sederis and Dantius are the New Houses, families that have only risen to prominence in recent years. The five Upper Houses directly control 27% of the Asari economy- the largest in the galaxy, twice as large as the Salarian and Turian economies.

Then there are the Lower Houses. About thirty of these Lower Houses exist, mostly from important colonies. Though they do not wield as much power between them as the Upper Houses (24% of the economy), the Lower Houses have substantial influence in Asari- and through it, galactic- politics.

Arliya Sederis, as the heiress of House Sederis- and therefore, one of the most important Asari in the galaxy- was known for her deviousness and undisciplined nature since she turned 50- about six years old in comparison to a pre-Janus Key humanity. She was, of course, smart, and had the tutoring of many of Thessia's brightest, which helped her understand that if her House was to stay prominent, she had to clean up her act. Which she did, on the outside. The reality was that such behavior had receded over time, but the reality was that she merely was better at hiding it now

She found out that a few hundred years of 'hiding' emotions really did not help her case now.

"Commander! Relay 314 Alpha is active, and there is a ship of unknown make and design near itâ€¦scans show it as frigate weight, ma'am!" reported the Asari crewwoman with a slight hint of frantic panic in her voice. "Senior Captain Victus has ordered all ships to hold fireâ€¦Turian ships are complying, but the Asari ships are asking for confirmation from you, ma'am."

Pirates? Slavers? The Hegemony? Who would be so foolish as to activate a Mass Relay leading to unknown space? A new race, perhaps?

Before she could continue on a bout of mindless tangents, Sederis took a deep breath and calmed herself.

You are the heiress of House Sederis. Look the part.

Her mind raced for solutions to her current predicament. The Batarian

Hegemony was not as stupid as this, so she doubted that it was them. The Terminus powers knew better than to do things like this, and slavers and pirates were not very likely considering that many new species in the Terminus were still ripe for the taking.

So why was the Relay active?

It was then that she came to the obvious conclusion. _A new race._

"Get me a scan on the ship, look for traces of element zero!" she barked out to her crew.

A mere two seconds later, the reply came in the form of a curious voice.

"Scans showâ€|that must be wrongâ€|scans show that there is no EEZO onboard the unknown, Commander," a crewwoman stated.

No Element Zero? Primitive? Not enough information to know that. At least we can cross out Kinetic Barriers and Mass Accelerators off the list, since they require EEZO. And I doubt that they have artificial gravity, nor FTL communications, since those run on EEZO-based systems as well. Even the Protheans used EEZO for that, and they were the most advanced civilization of all time!

"Incoming signal, ma'am!" declared another crewwoman, this one at the communications center. "It seems to beâ€|what is thatâ€|binary?"

"What is it?" Sederis snapped, interrupting the musing of the crewwoman.

"I think that it's a First Contact packageâ€|should I accept it, ma'am?" the crewwoman questioned.

Sederis nodded.

"Isolating consoleâ€|downloading the fileâ€|it seems surprisingly compatibleâ€|alright! It might be of lower quality than we are used to, since the files are of a different format than we are used to," she announced proudly. "I am surprised that we could even make it compatible in the first place."

"Well? What's in it?" demanded Sederis, now impatient.

The crewwoman opened the file, then began taking on a perplexed look. "What is goingâ€|Goddess!"

The sudden exclamation alarmed both Ship Commander Riena Vasil and Sederis.

"It's a translator matrix, similar to the one used by the Council racesâ€|do I have permission to upload our language files there?" the request contained a small hint of a plea, as if she wanted to see how the matrix worked.

Sederis nodded absentmindedly, now pondering on the turn of events.

Translator Matrices? This race must have had experienced first contact beforeâ€|

"Upload completeâ€|that's weirdâ€|is itâ€|oh noâ€|the matrix isâ€|"

Vasil, now on edge due to the incessant monologue, then began to growl. "What. Is. It?"

"I think the matrix is self-aware, ma'am," the Asari crewwoman replied in a worried tone.

In that instant, Sederis was on her feet, alarmed. The revelation of the dangers of AI, clearly stated by the Protheans in the Athame Archives (located under the Temple of Athame), though not known to most of the galaxy's denizens, had resulted in the Asari banning AIs for millennia.

And for good reason tooâ€|look at the Quarians and the Gethâ€|if this new race is using AIs then we will have to remove the threat before it can end like the Protheans' war.

Before she could ask for confirmation, the screen showed a message, evidently newly sent.

-ON BEHALF OF THE RECLAIMERS, I BID YOU WARM GREETINGS. I AM RECLAIMER SCIENCE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ETN-846579, OR EINSTEIN FOR SHORTâ€"

It seemed like there would have been more messages, but Sederis immediately barked out once she saw the initial message.

"AI! Deactivate that console, NOW! And get me Victus!"

* * *

><p>CIC, THW Palaven Sun
_Saviorne System

>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Victus watched the unknown ship with mounting agitation. The suspense in the atmosphere of the _Sun_'s Combat Information Center had nearly reached a breaking point when the _Sunset Hazel _contacted them.

"Victus!" the voice that the Senior Captain had come to loathe came from the speakers, while the screen fizzled to show the bridge of the _Hazel_ and its commander. "Charge up your weapons, and tell your forces to do the same."

"What?" the orders caused Victus to stare dumbly at the screen.

"We are going to destroy that vesselâ€|it is from an ignorant race who is recklessly opening Mass Relays, and one who is using AIs. We both know the laws regarding such situations, yes?" the Asari spoke slowly and condescendingly, as if she was conversing to an intellectually and mentally challenged idiot.

"That law doesn't apply to First Contact scenarios!" Victus exclaimed agitatedly.

"It's Citadel Law, Victus! Are you telling me that the Turians not have no regard for Citadel Law?" she challenged.

"This is not about the Turian Hierarchy, it's about a new race who doesn't even know about the Citadel, so how exactly-"

"Artificial Intelligences, Victus! Need I remind you of the Geth and Quarrians?" Sederis interrupted him, not giving him a chance to rebut anything. "We need to destroy them now, before this goes down the Terminus butthole."

"This goes against everything the Asari believe in, Sederis-"

"You do not get to decide what the Asari believe in, _turian_," the visibly angered Fleet Commander replied, spitting the last word with enough venom to kill a Vorchas. "Show respect to your superiors, and follow your Goddess-damned orders!"

Then she cut the link.

Victus' mandibles fluttered in consternation, his crew now looking at him expectantly.

"Sir?" a communications tech broke the silence. "Fleet Commander Sederis is opening a fleet-wide comm. channel."

"Patch us in," sighed the Senior Captain.

"To all crewmembers of the Joint Patrol Fleet Theta, this is your Fleet Commander speaking," Sederis' voice boomed over the comm. "In a few moments, we will be engaging with a ship belonging to a new race. This race has opened Mass Relays in a reckless manner, not thinking of the consequences of doing so. In addition to this, they utilize AIs. We all saw what happened with the Quarrians and the Geth. This means that they are a THREAT to galactic stability, and that it is our DUTY to stop them before they continue to threaten the civilized races of the galaxy in this method. Goddess help us."

It was short, brief, and to the point. Most importantly, mused Victus, was the fact that she played the cards of 'threat to galactic stability' and 'duty'- two things that Turians would not ignore. Since most of the Fleet was composed of Turian warshipsâ€¦

Victus shook his head again.

'This is going to end badly, I just know it,' he thought morbidly, before preparing himself. It didn't matter if he didn't want to fight these aliens. It didn't matter that he was even a little curious as to how these aliens managed to have AIs that didn't rebel. He was a Turianâ€¦and a good Turian always follows ordersâ€¦even if he hates them.

* * *

><p>RSS Curious Flames
_Unknown System
>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

"I don't like the way that they're not responding," the captain of the _Flames _muttered under his breath. Kevin Barnes was a veteran of

the Zerg War, a conflict that resulted in billions of deaths on the Reclaimer/Terran side alone. He had the scars to prove it, received when a Zerg Swarm boarding party attempted to capture the frigate he had been serving on.

Doctor Amanda Chang merely raised an eyebrow at his words, hearing them but not saying anything. She had learned the hard way to trust the veterans of wars, due to the simple fact that those who survived wars were usually smart (they had to be to survive) or just plain lucky. Either one was good for her.

"Einstein, what the heck happened when you send the message?" Barnes gave Einstein a piercing look.

"I'm not sure, sir. They uploaded their language to the translation matrix, which, I believe, is High Thessian, if this translation isn't wrong. From there on, I sent a simple message, the standard fare," Einstein shrugged, truly perplexed.

"So—who we are, who you are, and your designation, yes?" Chang finally interjected.

Einstein nodded, his hard-light 'head' bobbing up and down.

"Movement detected—I'm getting anomalous mass fluctuations from those ships, sir!" reported a sensors tech to the captain.
"Damn—they're moving quite fast for their size!"

"Even the cruiser?" questioned the captain, his interest piqued. Reclaimer naval combat doctrine placed cruisers as long range to medium range combatants that would slug it out, while battleships engaged at closer ranges. As such there was not much need for a fast cruiser (destroyers and frigates filled that niche), so it was strange.

"Aye sir—the fu- oh, crap! Power levels rising, I think they're going to—"

In that instant, Barnes, on reflex if anything, tapped into the 'Battlenet' through his Psionic Neural Interface, the newer version of the old Neural Interfaces, except it now allowed for 'linked' squads, a tactical Battlenet, and a whole set of advantages that scientists could only dream of two hundred years ago.

Unlike certain people, who would get nauseous from using PNIs, Barnes had no problems with it. Immediately, he was alerted to the incoming projectiles, seemingly travelling in slow motion. Orders flew from him at the speed of thought as nearby crewmembers became 'linked' and Einstein took command of the ship, rolling it to its left, causing some of the unaware scientists to lose their footing and fall.

'Einstein!' he screamed at the AI mentally. 'Get us the fuck out of here!'

The AI did not reply, but Barnes could 'feel' that they were turning around, his regular eyesight also seeing the same. While people could be 'linked' together to share things like line-of-sights, information and to communicate, it did not stop a person from seeing the real

world, though it is reported that the 'real world' always seems slower when in Psionic/Linked mode.

"Incoming projectiles!" came the shout from another crewman, for the benefit of the unlinked scientists, really, as his thoughts had been 'heard' by the rest of the linked crew.

Einstein, also able to tap into the Battlenet due to its state as a psionic-technological fusion, immediately threw the _Flames_ into evasive maneuvers, but the enemy would not be denied. The first hit came from the now-hostile cruiser, smashing through the paltry shields that were there. Two shots from the hostile frigates closed in, travelling at a lower velocity than the one from the cruiser, but still unbelievably fast. Its small size, though, was a blessing for the ship, as one hit deflected off the hull (a glancing shot only). The other slug tore through the cargo compartment of the _Flames_, causing decompression in that area. Whether by dumb luck or skill, no one had been there, so there were no deaths.

"Sending mass to the relay" | 5 | 4 |

Einstein's countdown was not helped by the news from the crewman manning the sensors, whose name Barnes now knew as Daniel Volker.

'Another volley from the cruiser and frigates!' the alarmed thought raced through the minds of the crew.

Einstein, this time, could not do any evasive maneuvers. To do so would throw them off course, and they needed to go through the relay. There were a few reasons for this, the foremost being that they had to warn the Reclaimer force on the other end before the hostiles went through the relay- that ruled out using slipspace.

" | 3 | 2 |

The volley inched ever closer, almost reaching the _Flames_. Barnes found himself muttering a prayer for the first time in decades, something that did not really surprise him. After all, you would find no atheists in foxholes- but that was probably his catholic upbringing speaking.

Just as the volley of abnormally fast but small rounds neared them, the blue tendrils that looked so much like electricity latched onto the ship, flinging them thousands of light years away from their newfound enemies.

Barnes breathed a sigh of relief, ignoring the cheering from the exhilarated crew of the science vessel.

For it was rather obvious that the Reclaimers would have another war on their hands.

And war was a hell that Barnes would rather stay out of.

* * *

><p>AN: Interestingly, the Turian equivalent of SSV (canonically) is PFS. I got that from Mass Effect 3, when Cortez is watching the ships

on the citadel. He says 'a turian cruiser, the PFS Ravinclaw.' I think. Anyway, I like THW more, and since I'm screwing all non-firepower related canon...might as well use THW.<p>

3. The Start of a New War

Previously, on the Reclaimer Effect: First Contact

Barnes breathed a sigh of relief, ignoring the cheering from the exhilarated crew of the science vessel.

_For it was rather obvious that the Reclaimers would have another war on their hands. _

And war was a hell that Barnes would rather stay out of.

* * *

><p>"Only the dead have seen the end of war"- Plato, Greek philosopher and mathematician

* * *

><p>Bridge, RMS Moscow
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

The scene was decidedly unprofessional. The officers were panicking, as were the crewmen, and despite his lack in combat experience Captain Raymond Carver knew that a panicked and edgy crew would not help anyone's case, especially on a warship.

To be truthful, he was panicking too- it was to be expected, of course. After all, no one expects what an unknown artifact created by unknown aliens do.

In fact, the only sentient being aboard the _Moscow_ that wasn't either ignorant to the situation or panicking would have been George, the AI assigned to the ship. George, unlike most AIs, did not like to interact with humans. It wasn't prejudice, just that he was created from the mind of a brilliant but extremely reclusive man. He only appeared for short moments, and even then his presence was limited- when not in combat, AIs weren't really required for the ship to run, anyway.

That was why despite the situation, nearly everyone on the Bridge of the _Moscow_ jumped up in shock at the booming tone he had poured through the speakers.

"SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP! STOP PANICKING! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE NAVAL OFFICERS, SO ACT LIKE ONE GODDAMMIT!"

The bridge crew went mute with shock for a few seconds, before Carver decided to take control.

"George is rightâ€|back to your stations, and get me info on what the hell just happened to the _Flames_," he ordered the suitably chastised officers.

Carver then gave an almost imperceptible nod of thanks to the

Hard-Light Pedestal that George was 'standing' on.

George then spoke up. "Captain, I think I know what happened just nowâ€|cam feeds show the unknown artifact, now designated U1, activating and sending some kind of blue tendril to the _Flames_. After that the Flames disappeared, but there was some kind of unknown residue left behind."

"Was it a weapon? A rail-gun, some kind of alien doodad?" questioned one of the gunnery officers, Lieutenant Viktor Kamarov.

"I don't know, ell-tee," replied George. "But it doesn't fit the profile of a weapon, nor a defense station- after all, if it was a weapon or defense platform, why put it out here in the middle of nowhere? There's nothing to defend here! In any case, HIGHCOM at Reach has been notified."

One less thing to do, at least. Thank God for these AIs.

With that errant thought pushed aside, Carver then interjected into the conversation.

"What do we know about the artifact then?"

George shrugged. "Nearly nothingâ€|I wouldn't suggest touching it though, you don't know what could happen."

"And what of the _Flames_?" Lieutenant Kamarov demanded. "It's unarmed, with weak shieldsâ€|goddamn scientists always preferred speed over safetyâ€|and we have no idea where it went!"

"What do you suggest we do, Lieutenant?" snapped George irritably. "I want to get them back as much as you do, but we simply can't take unnecessary risksâ€|and touching an alien artifact that just caused the disappearance of one ship without knowing what it actually does is definitely an _unnecessary _risk."

"Sir!" the communications officer suddenly spoke up. "Commanders Vasquez, Fujita, Samson and Singh are requesting for orders."

"Are we in Battle Formation yet?" Carver asked.

"The frigates are in standard ready formation, MACs are charged for them as well. Linchpin Turrets have been set to Ready mode, and their shields were already up from the start. The Forerunner Beam aboard the _Moscow_ is charged and ready, as are the MACs," George listed off quickly. "Systems and shields are at full efficiency, so we're as ready as we can be."

"Now all we need is for ET to show his scaly ass so we can blast him," Denton snorted, causing a rise of chuckles from several bridge officer, slightly alleviating the tension.

"You might just get that wish, Commander Denton," George then interrupted. "Captain, we're picking up a weird increase in some form of energy coming from the artifact!"

Goddammit Denton, why did you have to jinx it?

Carver shoved the thought aside immediately.

"Is it going to fire?" he prodded.

"I don't know, hell, we have practically no info on this-"

Then the sensors tech exclaimed out loud, saying something that would cause a sigh of relief from the crew.

"New ship just appeared on the scansâ€¦it's the _Flames_!"

Thank Godâ€¦!

Some muttering then came from the sensors technician. All Carver got from it was 'damaged' and 'malfunction.'

"Sensors, what is it?" he demanded after a few seconds of waiting.

George then spoke up for the distracted Sensors techies.

"Scans of the _Flames_ are picking up signs of battle damage, including a decompressed stern," he reported.

Ah, shit.

"Hail themâ€¦let us see what the hell is going on."

* * *

><p>Bridge, ARS Sunset Hazel
_Saviorne System

>Carina-Sagittarius Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

"How in the Goddess' name did that frigate survive a direct hit from a Dreadnought and another from a Cruiser?" Sederis demanded, though she was feeling shocked on the inside. A Dreadnought's main gun could tear through a council frigate's barriers and thin armor with a single hit (then again, frigates weren't meant for frontline heavy duty). The fact that the unknown frigate survived a direct hit from both a Dreadnought and a cruiser, along with a glancing shot from another cruiser, was very surprising, and caused a sense of foreboding.

"Unknown, ma'am. All we saw from the feeds are that the hit from the _Hazel_ took down their barriers, though it caused the shot to deflect. The shots from the _Serrice_ only managed to score a glancing hit, and the _Passionate Light_ only managed to damage the stern section- a cargo bay, I think- of the ship," reported another crewwoman.

The reason why the entire fleet hadn't opened fire was due to range issues. The _Hazel_, as a Dreadnought, had the greatest engagement range due to the sheer velocity of their rounds. The cruisers and frigates needed to get closer to fire, so the fact that the _Serrice_ and _Passionate Light_ even managed to hit was surprising. The Asari frigates had managed to fire off a volley, but by the time the volley was about to hit the unknowns had already left through the Mass Relay. The Turians, on the other hand, did not engage at all due to their smaller range. Turian warships had less refined EEZO-processing systems and cores when compared to the Asari, so they fired at slower

speeds. They compensated for it by having larger rounds, thus affecting Turian naval warfare doctrine. While the Turian ships would still be agile and fast, their tactics mostly included medium range warfare, with only Dreadnoughts taking part in long range sniping. Unlike the Krogan during the Rachni Wars and Krogan Rebellions, they did not relish close-range engagements, preferring to keep the enemy at arm's length and slug it out at that range.

"Order the fleet forward, to the Mass Relay. And send this message to the Matriarch Council on Armali," Sederis ordered to the crew as she passed on a datapad to the communications technician.

The technician didn't read the message itself, as it was considered 'Top Secret.' She merely uploaded the file, and sent in through an FTL Comm. Buoy to Armali, the unofficial capital of the Asari Republics.

* * *

><p>RMS Moscow
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Captain Barnes had just finished telling Carver and the four other commanders of the frigates what exactly had occurred. The alien ships, the cruiser at least, had an extremely high engagement ranges, far higher than those of the MAC guns. Still, it was expected that micro-slipspace jumps could theoretically remove that advantage, but that was beside the point at the moment.

"Are you sure they are hostile?" Commander Singh questioned, his handsome and unscarred face belying the fact that he had the most combat experience out of the five of them (the warship commanders/captains).

"Positiveâ€|I don't understand why, though. We just sent them the FCP, you know, the translation matrix, and they dumped their language in there. Einstein, being the Science AI that he is, managed the translate the damn thing pretty fast, and he sent out the standard greeting. Who we are, who he is, and his designation, the standard fare," Barnes listed off. "Then they cut the message channel, and began firing on us. The shields of the _Flames_ were very weak in the first place, and we were due for maintenance checks on Shanxi when the call came in for us. It's just dumb luck that only one of their shots hit us, and even dumber luck that the second hit decompressed an empty area."

"Have you transferred the data to Reach yet?" Commander Jill Samson asked, referring to the most fortified world in known space, only marginally challenged by Earth, Sanghelios and Csilla.

"Already didâ€|George, the _Moscow_'s AI, should be able to predict when the 'Relays' are going to be used," Barnes finished.

"Relays?" Commander Carmen Vasquez interrupted, her tone curious and questioning.

"That's what the things are called, apparently. Mass Relays. Einstein found out milliseconds before we used the damn thingâ€|" Barnes trailed off.

"CAPTAIN!" George practically screamed. "The Relay is about to be usedâ€¦from the other end! Those aliens that attacked the _Flames_, most likely!"

"Barnes, get the _Flames_ behind us, and warm up the slipspace drive," Carver commanded, his tone not brooking any disagreement. Then he turned to the other commanders as seen on the hard-light screen. "Commandersâ€¦wait for my signal, then open fire. It might have just been a misunderstandingâ€¦George, tell General Williams and Governor Leng to put the Cluster on high alert."

The people on the screen, and the single AI, nodded, and then the feed cut off.

Carver turned to the bridge, watching the tactical screens as the other ships moved into formation in practiced movements.

The newly named 'Mass Relay' began emitting a more radiant blue glow, before forty-one warships of varying size appeared in the same way the _Flames_ did.

"Tactical, give me the numbers of the unknowns," Carver requested, mentally preparing himself on the number of hostiles he could potentially be battling.

"One cruiser-weight vessel, nine frigate-weight vessels, and thirty-one corvette-weight vessels, sir!" the tactical officers listed off.

Cruiser-weights were from eight hundred meters to three kilometers in length, though the smallest Reclaimer cruiser-weights were the _Stanforth_-class, like the _Moscow_. Frigate-weights were from four hundred and ninety to seven hundred and ninety-nine meters, and corvette weights were from a hundred to three hundred and ninety-nine meters. Anything below that was either a gunboat, dropship, or transport. Ships exceeding three kilometers were not given 'weights,' as they were seen in far lesser numbers anyway.

"Hail the cruiser, and prep the translation program," Carver ordered as the fleet of forty-one warships, a mix of eleven elegant-looking ships (the cruiser, two frigates and eight corvettes) and thirty decidedly more predatory ships (seven frigates and twenty-three corvettes), began orienting themselves to face his force of one cruiser and four frigates.

Carver began a check on his appearance. Unlike the old human naval uniforms used during the Human-Covenant War, Reclaimer Star Navy uniforms were all 'Combat Skins.' Based on the lighter versions of Forerunner armors, Shipboard Combat Skins were equipped with rudimentary shields, magnetic boots, vacuum capability, and small thrusters for maneuvering in space. They also allowed a HUD if the helmets were used, and due to the Battle Ready state of the warships, every crewman was using their full SCS. It was useful, especially considering the danger of Zerg boarders during the ongoing Zerg Campaigns, due to the fact that the crewmen onboard would not be helpless to the boarders. It did not mean that they could just jump into combat- rather, it meant that they had more survivability against a Zerg boarding party. All factory-standard SCSs were white, as one of the colors of the Reclaimer Star Navy, and the UNSC Navy before it. Finding his appearance to be adequate, Carver then stood

in front of the camera, his helmet off to provide a more 'friendly' look.

"Sending hailâ€|you're on, Captain," reported the communications tech.

The screen fizzled and then showed a view of what Carver thought was the bridge of these aliens, almost causing him to gape. Though the bridge was rather opulent and elegant, it was not the cause of his near-break of protocol. It was the appearance of the aliens themselvesâ€|they looked like blue human femalesâ€|with no earsâ€|and weird head fringes in the place of hair. And they all looked so damn similar.

_How do they even differentiate one from another? That one has slightly different skin, being lighter blue, butâ€|ah, who the hell cares? Better get on with it. _

Taking a deep breath to compose his thoughts, Carver then spoke. Though he was using English, the lingua franca of the Reclaimers (other major languages, like Mandarin Chinese and Spanish still existed as popular second languages), the translation matrix would be able to translate it into 'High Thessian,' which was evidently the language used by these unknown aliens (they had only received the language, nothing on the history or anything like that).

"On behalf of the Reclaimer Star Ascendency, I bid you warm greetings. We desire peaceful contact, and are aware that you have fired on an unarmed civilian vessel. Though we understand that this could be a tragic misunderstanding, we would like to request that we discuss it like civilized beings. Thank you."

One of the aliens, presumably their commander, who seemed to have gotten over their shock of seeing a species just like them, then snorted in derision.

"You opened a Mass Relay, a clear violation of Council Law, and are utilizing Artificial Intelligences, also a violation of Council Law. We are open to discussion, if you power down your weapons and prepare to be boarded, and deactivate all your AIs," the blue woman announced.

Carver then pointed out the obvious.

"And _how_ exactly were we supposed to know of your 'Laws?'"

"You primitive, presumptuous fool! Are you that ignorant of the galaxy? Do you not know the dangers of opening mass relays leading to unknown locations? Do you even know the dangers of AI?" the alien growled back.

At that point, a new alien popped onto the screen, this one decidedly tougher looking, like a grounded raptor. He was speaking in another language, one that Carver did not understand. It was definitely not High Thessian, and the new 'Raptors' were decidedly not the same race as the one he had talked to.

The 'raptor' said something, sounding like squawks and birdlike chirps, causing the other alien to glare at him, presumably through another screen.

"I choose what we do, Victus, not you! Know your place, you _Turian_! I don't care what the Hierarchy will doâ€|Council Law supersedes that!" the 'Blue' practically exploded. "We will have a talkâ€|later. As for you," 'Blue' turned to Carver, "make your choice. Do you truly want a war against the Council races?"

Alright, Raptor is a 'Turian,' possible the name of the race. They are part of a 'Council,' of which there are multiple races- who knows how many. Hierarchy is a government, possibly the one Raptor is part of. Evidently they disagree on somethingâ€|and they, the Blue at least, hate AIs. Wonder why?

"I am afraid I will have to decline your farce of an offer. AIs are a part of our society for hundreds of years, and we will not murder our friends who have stood by us just because a presumptuous _bitch_ like you wants us to," Carver retorted, angry at the fact that the 'Blue' thought she could order the Ascendency around.

"Then you will die."

The raptor/turian looked as if he was about to argue when the feed cut off.

"Captain, the majority of the alien ships just experienced a jump in energy, I think they're going to fire-"

Carver braced himself for what he was going to do next.

Clenching his fist, he accessed the Battlenet, the nausea from doing so almost causing him to hurl. He was one of the one in every ten million humans who had PNIMS (Psionic Neural Interface Misalignment Syndrome), a genetic condition that seemed to be centered in his psionic capabilities and not the genes itself, which ensured that Reclaimer scientists could not remove it any time soon- after all, despite decades of research, psionics was a rather new field of study, even with the help of the Terrans.

Sufferers of PNIMS would have difficulty accessing Psi-Net (think the internet but connected by psionic waves, allowing for instant download of knowledge), as well as the Battlenet for the ones in the military. As such, very few sufferers of PNIMS actually served in the military, Carver being one of those few.

Nevertheless, he managed to tap into the Battlenet, and was instantly 'Linked' to the other crew. The nausea only appeared when PNIMS sufferers attempted to access the Psi-Net/Battlenet, and when they left. The longer they stayed, the worse the nausea. The tactical advantages given by the Battlenet, though, meant that Carver shoved the knowledge that he would most likely be heaving like there was no tomorrow when he disconnected. If he survived the battle, that is.

'Captain Barnes, is your slipspace drive online?' Carver asked over the Link.

'â€|Yes, sir, but that hit to the stern did more damage than we thought! We only picked up the damage a few minutes ago, and the techs tell me that they'll need at least an hour to repair the damage done to the ship to make it capable of surviving the trip to

slipspace,' Barnes' reply was loud and clear, even though he was on another ship.

'Shit, we don't have an hour, Barnesâ€¦|get your crew aboard the-'

The tactical officer of the _Moscow_ practically shouted over the Battlenet right there and then.

'INCOMING FIRE, EVASIVE ACTIONS, NOW!'

Carver could feel the _Moscow_ and the four attendant frigates boost themselves away from the fire, but he soon realized that the _Curious Flames_ wouldn't have been able to evade. Its agility and speed would have allowed evasion before, but with the damage the _Flames_ took, they would be lucky if it could even evade a few of the shots.

'Helm, put us between the _Flames_ and the barrage, now! They won't be able to evade!' he ordered over the Battlenet.

The crew of the _Moscow_ complied, following his orders right down to the letter.

The volley, though horrendous, was fired from what could be considered extreme range. As such most of the corvettes' shots and about half of the frigates' shots missed, but the cruiser definitely hit.

Unlike the _Flames_, whose shields were requiring repair and were not very strong, Keyes-class Frigates were known for a few things. One was their extreme modularity- it was easy to change the weapons used on Keyes-class frigates, which was why the Destroyers in the Reclaimer Star Navy were often just heavily armored and more armed Keyes-class frigates, though they sacrificed speed and agility. Another thing they were known for was their resistance to damage, utilizing the honeycomb structure that was popularized by the Halcyon-class cruisers of the Human-Covenant War. The last thing they were known for was their abnormally efficient power systems. A Keyes-class frigate could have extremely powerful shields for a ship of its size.

The advent of energy shielding into the RSN had been spent on making it more resistant to energy weapons, not the kinetic type. After all, why waste resources and valuable scientists on increasing the resistance of a shield to weapons that their enemies did not use? The Insurrection had effectively been over for decades, ever since autonomy was granted, and every hostile star nation, and even the allied ones, had an affinity for energy weapons. The Covenant, the Vargr, hell, even the Mon Calamari, Protoss, and Chiss had been using energy weaponry!

To quote one captain during the Vargr War, 'it's like almost every race out there uses energy weaponsâ€¦|'

Unfortunately, Murphy's Law was a fickle thing. Their enemy now used kinetic weapons- extremely long-ranged kinetic weapons.

The enemy cruiser fired three times, two rounds to the _Moscow_ and a round to the _Nile_, a Keyes-class frigate commanded by Commander

Chandra Singh. One round smashed directly onto the shields of the _Nile_, which held the hit off perfectly, though the shield actually dropped to 59.2%. The other two hit the _Moscow_ in the timespan of a few seconds, hammering off 98 kilotons of TNT equivalent onto the shields of the cruiser (in Reclaimer terms).

That was equivalent to nearly two-fifths of the _Moscow_'s shield strength, which did not bode well for the ship's crew.

The hostile cruiser was outside of the effective MAC range, which, under normal circumstances, would not have been an issue, due to the micro-slip-space jump capabilities of the reverse-engineered Forerunner slip-space drives (it wasn't even 1% of the Forerunner drives, of which none had been recovered, but that was more due to limited capabilities of human reactors and understanding of Forerunner tech). The problem was that if the _Moscow_ jumped at that point, the _Flames_, already damaged, would essentially be condemned to death. And Carver, unlike the more ruthless naval commanders, was not ready to condemn innocent civilians to die.

'The main gun of that damned cruiser is weaker than our MACs, but they are damned fast, so they have the ranged advantage,' Carver announced on the Battlenet, subconsciously knowing the information due to the tactical officer's sharing of it. 'Singh, take the other frigates and begin hammering them, use micro-jumps if you need to.'

A brief 'understood' was all that Singh said before the four other frigates entered slip-space-

Right into the middle of the enemy fleet.

Needless to say, it was pure chaos for the enemy.

* * *

><p>CIC, THW Palavan Sun
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

"C1 through 4 has reappeared in the midst of our fleet, Senior Captain!" exclaimed an alarmed crewman as he read the data readouts on the screen.

"They're firing-"

"SPIRITS!"

"Those damned cruisers guns more powerful than a dreadnought!"

"_Revona_ is reporting hull breaches!"

"Cover the _Impera Twilight_!"

"_Eidesche_ is under fire!"

More reports filtered in, being reported by the almost panicking Turian crewmen and crewwomen.

Victus growled angrily, cursing the spirits-damned Fleet Commander.

He had WARNED her, told her not to engage the enemy dreadnought, which was only out-massed by one ship in Citadel space- the Destiny Ascension. If these new aliens used a Super-DREADNOUGHT to open mass relays, then what else did they have hidden in their pockets?

But no, the idiot Asari had to order them to surrender, and had to order them to deactivate their AIs. Had she been a Hierarchy fleet officer, Victus would have removed her of her command, but he could not do that- it was a wholly different chain of command, and she was on a different ship, with a crew that was not part of the Hierarchy.

The aliens refused to surrender and deactivate their AIs, which really was of no surprise, considering that any intelligent spacefaring race worth their salt would not listen and comply with the demands of a random unknown newcomer, one that had fired on one of their ships before.

That led to the Asari ordering the fleet to fire, and the entire fleet- minus his cruiser and three frigates commanded by the more logical captains- had done as she ordered. From this extreme range, it was really no surprise that the majority of the fleet had missed, as cruiser and frigate rounds weren't as fast as the ones dreadnoughts fired.

One of the dreadnought's shots had hit one of the new race's cruisers, before being deflected like it was nothing, though it did flare quite a bit. The other two dreadnought rounds had hammered onto the new race's large dreadnought, its shields evidently handling the rounds without much strain.

That was when things got weird.

Four inky black and spherical portals appeared in front of the four cruisers, before the cruisers entered it. Mere seconds later, the same spheres opened in the midst of the joint fleet, before the four same cruisers exited it, firing as they did so. Two turian frigates, the Revona and the Impera Twilight, both of which had fired on the new race, were hit first. The new race did not use mass accelerators, instead using rounds that seemed gigantic compared to the ones fired by mass accelerators. They were slower, which limited their range- but from this close distance it was inconsequential. The lone dreadnought within the patrol fleet couldn't fire on them without risking hitting their own ships, and the feeble firepower of frigates and cruisers (compared to those of dreadnoughts) obviously showed here. One shot smashed aside the feeble kinetic barriers of the Revona and caused horrendous damage to its hull. Another shot utterly devastated the Impera Twilight, obliterating its barriers and snapping the keel of the frigate in two. That was just the result of one enemy cruiser's shots (it had fired three shots, but one missed).

The other three cruisers then set upon the fleet like a pack of varren, tearing apart an Asari frigate and four turian frigates before they could fire back.

Victus shook his head. The die was cast. He would fight- the alternative was simply not possible now.

"Coordinate our spirits-damned fire, get the Revona to retreat

now!" he barked aloud, and soon the orders were relayed, allowing the uncoordinated turian ships to form up and begin putting the pressure on the enemy cruisers.

A nearby Asari frigate- the _Cyona_, if he was not mistaken- then shattered as two slugs hit it, one slug obliterating the shields and deflecting off into space and the other smashing through the marginally more effective armor of the Asari. It did not help them, though. The _Cyona_ went up explosively, along with the few hundred Asari crew onboard. They were not the first to die in this battle. Victus was pretty sure that they would not be the last, either.

* * *

><p>The battle was now in full swing. The Reclaimer frigates had found that one shot was enough to destroy the shields and pierce the armor of the 'Raptor' corvettes, while two rounds were needed for the corvettes belonging to the 'Blue bitches from hell,' as Commander Jill Samson had put it.<p>

The enemy had split into two groups now. The Raptor ships were coordinating their barrages, ensuring that maximum damage would be done. Had it not been for her frigate's hardy armor and lots of luck, Commander Carmen Vasquez and her men and women would have been killed before they entered slipspace to retreat and pull out. The other group was composed of the 'elegant' ships, which were suspected to be under the command of the 'blue' almost-human alien race. The sole cruiser, two frigates and six remaining corvettes of the 'Blues' (the shortened form of 'blue bitches from hell') had begun orienting themselves to the _Moscow_.

One might have wondered why the Reclaimers were fighting the enemy instead of retreating. The answer was simple, really. They needed to evacuate the science vessel _Curious Flames_, which had no slipspace capability due to the damage done to her hull. Frankly, it was a miracle the ship hadn't fallen apart on the relay jump back. The damage itself was also deceiving. On the surface, the _Flames_ seemed to be just fine and dandy, but the internal structure of the ship had already been compromised. Entering slipspace now would flood the ship with radiation that would, even with SCSs, kill the crew. And despite the advent of new, almost miraculous medical technologies, bringing someone back from the dead simply wasn't in the realm of possibilityâ€|yet.

The _Moscow_ was the ship to cover and evacuate the _Flames_, for a multitude of reasons. One was that it was the only ship that could entirely cover the _Flames_. Another was that it had the strongest shields. It also had the most docking bays and shuttles, so the evacuation would be faster.

Said evacuation was progressing as fast as it could, but the _Moscow_ was not a carrier or troopship. It simply did not have _that_ many shuttles to get everyone off. They also needed to wipe the _Flames_ of any data pertaining to Reclaimer worlds, as per the Cole Protocol (activated every time there was a war, which there was, since the Zerg War wasn't technically over yet). Then they also needed to plant charges on the ship just in case the reactors would not overload and cause the explosion, which also took more time.

The Reclaimer frigate force had almost lost one ship, the RMS

Narmada, under Commander Carmen Vasquez. Its shields had been taken down by a volley from three Raptor frigates (in Reclaimer terms) and fourteen Raptor corvettes, exerting a total of 78.6 kilotons of force and shattering the 120 KT Limit shields (the _Narmada_ had taken another barrage from a different group earlier). Still, the armor held the remaining shots at bay long enough for the _Narmada_ to retreat into slipspace. It would be bound for Shanxi, to drop off extra munitions if anything, before going to the nearby Fleet Node World of New Harvest.

* * *

><p>Bridge, RMS Nile
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

'The 'Blue' warships are orienting themselves to the _Moscow, _sir!' reported a crewman manning the sensors through the psionic link. 'They just jumped a few hundred kilometers outside of the _Moscow_'s effective engagement range!'

'Have they finished evacuating the _Flames_ yet?' demanded Commander Chandra Singh, who was a veteran of the Zerg War. Despite his youthful age and unscarred face he had been part of the bloodiest battles in the history of the Orion Arm during the post-Halo eras, one of which was the legendary Battle of Char.

This posting was supposed to be an easy job for them, a short mission before their long awaited shore leave at New Harvest.

The relative words in that sentence were clearly 'supposed to be.'

'Negative, sir! _Moscow_ reports that they still need to get the last fifteen crew and the marine team off the _Flames_!' Ensign Sonia Baines responded with the efficiency expected of a Reclaimer Star Navy officer.

_Damn it, _thought Singh. _The enemy's weapons range far exceeds that of the Moscow's, and Carver can't micro-jump to engage since he still has civvies onboard the Flames. Sending Fujita to assist would workâ€|but that means we lose half of the firepower we had at the start. The Vaal has reported shields at below half-strength, but sending them to assist the Moscow would be foolish, especially with the cruiser's main gun._

'Get Commander Fujita and the _Parana_ to assist the _Moscow_, and tell Samson and the _Vaal_ to form up on our starboard side!' he barked through the link.

* * *

><p>Bridge, RMS Parana
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

Commander Aki Fujita had not grown up expecting to be a naval officer. He was the son of two traders from the colony world of New Bountiful, and had chosen the navy due to his fascination on everything space when the time for his Mandatory Military Service had come.

One engagement with the Zerg later and he was on the fast track, rising through the ranks. Soon enough he realized that he enjoyed the life of a naval officer, and he chose to stay. This was his first tour of duty as a commander, and the first engagement where he was leading a crew, not being part of one. He was nervous, yes, but he did have faith in his crew.

He shoved aside the random thoughts as the RMS _Parana_ exited a micro-slip-space jump just a scant few hundred kilometers off the aft of a 'Blue' corvette.

Issuing a psionic command to fire, he watched in grim satisfaction as two rounds from the MAC shattered the corvette apart, the shields and armor not doing much to stop 128 kilotons equivalent of TNT from blasting apart the ship.

The Raptor ships' commander had been very smart to mass his firepower.

>It allowed them to swiftly take the Narmada out of play, and it had brought the shields of the _Vaal_ to below 50%. Despite the weak firepower (compared to the 'Blue' cruiser) of the smaller Raptor ships, Fujita knew that the _Nile_ and _Vaal_ would not last much more than a few minutes at most.

But that, for now, was not his concern. The enemy cruiser, two frigates and five corvettes had by now focused some of their attention to his frigate. Two of the aforementioned frigates and the corvettes all maneuvered themselves to face him within seconds- an impressive feat to be sure, cementing the suspicion the commanders had regarding the hostiles' focus on speed and agility.

The cruiser, though, had begun firing on the _Moscow_, though the _Moscow_ must have dumped nearly all power from tertiary and secondary systems into the shields, since they were holding.

'Fire the Phase Missiles on targets designated CR-1 through 3, and FF-1,' ordered Fujita, hoping that the new antimatter 'magic missiles' worked as advertised.

The order was acknowledged nearly immediately as the missiles pods on the _Parana_ released a barrage of fifty very large missiles into slip-space.

The M2611 'Phase' Missiles were modern-day humanity's first steps into using slip-space itself as a weapon. After seeing how poorly the Archer missiles had done against the Covenant during the devastating war that would shape humanity's mindset for centuries to come, scientists had slavishly worked day and night for years to find a solution to that problem.

Adding armor to the missiles lowered their speed and made them even more expensive, with negligible improvements. Adding faster engines required them to get in close and personal to even have a chance of not being intercepted by the Point Defense Systems.

It took five decades before a particularly eccentric scientist looked at it from a different perspective. Instead of making the missiles faster, or better armored, he did the opposite. The missile was enlarged to crazily large sizes, with a cheap one-time slip-space drive slapped onto it. Antimatter was used in the warhead, and it was

tested on a captured Covenant destroyer.

The missiles would literally pop out of the pods, enter a slipspace portal, and exit right outside of the enemy's shields (the shields themselves interfered with scanners, so you couldn't accurately dump them inside the shields), guaranteeing a near 80% hit.

Sure, it was more expensive, and yes, you could carry much less of them, but they actually hit the targets. Due to its relative newness, most Reclaimer frigates hadn't received them yet, and only the Parana had them in the current force.

Which was why Fujita was surprised- and not in a good way. The Phase Missiles dropped out of the pods and into slipspace, exiting right outside the alien 'shields' (the readings had been different, but they were still obstructed by it).

Covenant 'AIs,' which were poorly developed, inefficient and slow had a small chance (about 20%) of intercepting these missiles.

This time, 50% of the missiles had been 'lazed' before they could explode by the enemy's abnormally accurate point defense lasers. Most of the interceptions came from the corvettes, with the frigates suffering 70% hits.

One of the frigates then exploded after the MAC's last shot tore it to pieces, its shields downed by the barrage of deadly missiles. Two corvettes slightly damaged, and jumped into FTL immediately. Another corvette visibly lost its shields and did the same. The remaining two corvettes were in differing states. One had been turned into a derelict wreck, while the other was unscathed.

The remaining frigate and corvette recovered very fast, and instead of firing their spinal-mounted cannons, loosed seventy missiles.

Going into close range had its risk for the Reclaimer warships, and this was one of them. At longer ranges, conventional missiles could be casually picked off with ease, but the knife-fight situation the Parana found itself in meant that half of the ridiculously fast missiles hit the frigate.

Instead of merely exploding like conventional missiles, though, these missiles created abnormal and very deadly spatial tears, literally increasing and decreasing the mass of certain parts of the frigate.

The shields of the Parana suffered catastrophically from this, dropping to a scant 5%. A shot from the hostile frigate destroyed what was left of the shields.

Fujita cursed. He didn't know what the fuck was in those missiles, but they were deadly. Now all he could do was pray that the armor would hold.

'Launch another volley of Phase Missiles at those bastards, now!' he practically shouted out. The crew complied with speedy professionalism, launching the rest of the Phase Missiles at the enemy frigate and corvette. This time, almost all the missiles hit- no doubt due to the fact that there were less corvettes to

intercept.

The antimatter charges tore apart the remainder of the sole corvette's 'shields' and cratered the armor, causing it to break apart. The frigate's shields shattered, though its armor held- if barely. The ship immediately jumped into FTL, retreating from the fight.

'_Moscow _reports that the _Flames_ had been evacuated!' Fujita inwardly sighed with relief, ignoring the cheers of several crewmen and crewwomen.

'Celebrate later! Helm, get us out of here!' he ordered.

* * *

><p>RSS Curious Flames
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

The small hangar bay of the _Curious Flames _was filled with the eight marines and remaining crewmen who had set the drive core to self-destruct. They were awaiting pickup from what few shuttles the _Moscow_ had. With them was Captain Barnes, who had stubbornly insisted to assist the crew instead of evacuating.

As of right now Barnes was tapped into the Battlenet, and things weren't looking very good for the Ascendancy warships.

A marine then tapped him on the shoulder, and Barnes disconnected himself from the 'net, running to the waiting shuttle. It was a tight fit, but he wouldn't complain.

As they rushed towards to safety of the _Moscow,_ the _Curious Flames_ detonated in a spectacular fireball.

* * *

><p>Bridge, RMS Vaal
_Theta Habilis System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 11, 2614

The RMS _Vaal_, commander by Commander Jill Samson, shuddered as a full barrage from multiple frigates and corvettes broke through the already-battered shields of the frigate.

'Report!' demanded Samson through the psionic link, not liking the situation.

'Shields are down, hull breaches on deck 14,' responded an ensign at the damage control section. 'Shit, engineering has been exposed to space. Requesting information from any crew in that section.'

'SAMSON! This is Singh, the _Nile_ has lost shields and starboard armor is battered to shit! We need to pull out, pronto!' came the shout from Commander Chandra Singh, whom she had served alongside for years. 'The _Moscow _and _Parana_ are already pulling out, come on!'

'Incoming!' interrupted a crewman at the sensors station, mere seconds before the _Vaal _registered another hit, this one breaching

the armor.

'Ma'am, we lost engineering! Getting more info now!' exclaimed another crewman.

As damage reports trickled in, Samson realized that her slipspace drive was nonfunctional and would not work. It was just plain bad luck really, that one of the Raptor corvettes' shots had exposed the engineering deck and the drive core to vacuum.

The cold, hard truth slapped her in the face. She would not be leaving this fight alive. None of her crew would.

'Singh, get your ship out of here, now!' she growled over the link to her friend and comrade.

'What about you?' the other commander questioned.

'They took out the S-F drive—we'll hold them off for you to escape. Now GO!' she barked over the link, steely determination taking hold over her.

'It was an honor, Jill,' Singh replied, his voice cracking slightly. 'Good luck.'

As the link between the two of them broke, the RMS *Nile* began its approach into slipspace. The portal formed in front of the damaged frigate, its proud stature filled with holes.

'Listen up!' Samson shouted to her crew, receiving their full attention. 'Our slipspace drive is damaged. We won't be returning home. This will be the last mission that any of us will ever undertake!'

'The enemy outnumber us, and outguns us,' she continued. 'They hold all the cards here. They will win, today, and we will die.'

'They believe that we can be cowed, that we will surrender. They want to enslave us, to subjugate us. They want to wage war with us. The Covenant tried, and they lost, even with their fancy tech! The Vargr tried, and they're extinct! The Zerg tried, and we beat them back to the ground! These fuckers want to try? I say we give them a taste of what they will face!'

'We'll die, aye! But we'll also take so many of them with us they'll regret even knowing of us!'

The impossibly loud shouts of agreement filled the ship, and Commander Jill Samson's heart filled with pride at her crew.

They would all die today—but so would many of the enemy.

As the *Nile* entered slipspace, the *Vaal* charged the enemy.

* * *

><p>AN: That's it for this chapter. Here's a very long AN. Please read it before you flame me. Review if you want to, constructive criticism would be appreciated.<p>

Patrol Fleet Composition:

Asari: 1 Dreadnought, 2 Cruisers, 8 Frigates
>Turian: 7 Cruisers, 23 Frigates<p>

Now, you may be asking the 'Why are the Ascendancy shields so weak?'

Simple, really. Due to the lack of enemies using kinetic weapons, the Ascendancy did the 'smart' move (at the time) to focus on resistance to energy weapons. This paid off during the Vargr War, and was marginally effective during the Zerg War. No Insurrection means no hostile MACs, which means they have 'weaker' shields. The shields are slightly stronger than the Covies', due to better reactors, but that's about it.

To forestall any 'this is a Halo wankfest' insults, I will explain here. The firepower of any, and by any I mean ANY, dreadnought in Mass Effect can take down Ascendancy frigates, destroyers and cruisers in a fight where both sides are at long range and are stationary. Why?

The ME ships simply have a faster shell, and through that, a higher engagement range. These ships also have better agility and speed, due to mass reducing properties- properties that are far more important in space-based naval combat than most 'authors' on this site think. The ability to dodge your enemy and fire on them is a useful thing to have, and can decide the course of a battle. Add to the faster fire rate of the Mass Acceleratorsâ€|

In a defensive battle, the humans would have a harder time than in here. They would have to be in proximity of what they are defending, so they can't jump to the enemy without leaving whatever they want to defend (kind of like the _Moscow_).

On the other hand, the micro-slipspace capabilities of the humans in here (even the Covenant, with their poorly copied slipspace drives, could make accurate micro-slipspace jumps with shoddy calculations during the HCW) allow them to pop right in close to the Mass Effect 'fleet' here. Note that the Patrol Fleet only has one dreadnought, and that dreadnought is not under a truly competent commander's command. Had Victus been in charge of the dreadnought, the Ascendancy warships might have been defeated here.

As for the firepower of ME Cruisers and frigatesâ€|here, I got this from a pro-Mass Effect AND Halo guy from spacebattles. Anyway, the majority of the patrol fleet is composed of frigates (Mass Effect-scales), so their firepower isn't high.

Ship specs of the warships you just saw:

Tevura-class Dreadnought (ASARI): 900m

Unnamed Class of Asari Cruisers: 600m

Unnamed Class of Asari Frigates: 300m

Taetrus-class Cruiser (TURIAN): 500m

Kava-class Frigate (TURIAN): 200m

An analogy of MAC (Halo) VS Mass Accelerator Cannons (ME): 3-round Burst Shotgun versus Designated Marksman Rifle. Both will kill you. One does it up close and personal. The other does it from far away.

1000-meter mass accelerator (_Destiny Ascension_'s length)
>Speed: 5,031.25 kms (1.625% the speed of light)
>Kinetic Energy: 253 terajoules (2.53e14 joules)
Yield: 60.5 kilotons per shot

900-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 4,528.125 kms (1.51% the speed of light)
>Kinetic Energy: 205 terajoules (2.05e14 joules)
Yield: 49 kilotons per shot

700-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 3,521.875 kms (1.17% the speed of light)
>Kinetic energy: 124 terajoules (1.24e14 joules)
Yield: 29 kilotons per shot

600-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 3,018.75 kms (1% the speed of light)
>Kinetic Energy: 91.1 terajoules (9.11e13 joules)
Yield: 21 kilotons per shot

500-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 2,515.625 kms
>Kinetic Energy: 63.2 terajoules (6.32e13 joules)
Yield: 15 kilotons per shot

400-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 2,012.5 kms
>Kinetic Energy: 40.5 terajoules (4.05e13 joules)
Yield: 9 kilotons per shot

300-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 1,509.375 kms
>Kinetic Energy: 22.7 terajoules (2.27e13 joules)
Yield: 5 kilotons per shot

200-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 1,006.25 kms
>Kinetic Energy: 10.1 terajoules (1.01e13 joules)
Yield: 2.4 kilotons per shot

100-meter mass accelerator
>Speed: 503.125 kms
>Kinetic Energy: 2.53 terajoules (2.53e12 joules)
Yield: 605 tons per shot

Oh, and the 800-meter Mass Accelerator is 38 kilotons per shot.

Now, you might be asking the 'then why is everyone building frigates and cruisers?' question. It's simple, really.

COST. Element Zero is essentially the oil of the galaxy. And it's rare and dangerous to mine. EEZO, as it is called, is necessary for everything from starship drive cores to handheld firearms, and as such is expensive. A 500m cruiser does NOT consume five times the

amount of EEZO as a 100m frigate. It consumes MUCH, MUCH MORE. This isn't a linear thing- otherwise no one would bother with the frigates and just build cruisers. A Super-Dreadnought like the Destiny Ascension will consume an entire fleet's worth of EEZO. The good thing for the Asari is that the Ascension has 'almost as much firepower as the rest of the Asari fleets combined.'

It is glaringly obvious that the Asari and Salarians have almost ALL the good planets in systems capable of being reached by the Mass Relay Network and Mass Effect FTL drives. Note that these systems are abnormally rich in resources or have garden worlds. This is a ploy by the Reapers to ensure that the organic races do not bother to develop alternative FTL systems. After all, if you can get the good stuff with no effort, then why waste your time on an errand that might not even be successful? The Asari and Salarians have all the good planets due to them being the first to explore the Mass Relays, and ergo, reaching them first. They also had thousands of years to develop said planets into extremely industrious and prosperous worlds, which would make the majority of these colonies (though smaller in number to those of the Ascendancy) more developed than the majority of the human ones (the first of the inner colonies were established in the 2300s). Even assuming that the first extrasolar colony was settled in 2300 would mean that it has 'only' been developed for 300 or so years.

The turians, to a smaller extent, control 'good' planets through, and mostly through conquest. Their militaristic, slightly colonial attitude to towards the galaxy is rooted in the fact that very few garden worlds are dextro-friendly. This means that though they have the most planets among the Citadel races, very few are colonized by a large number of colonists, and those that areâ€|well, they're well-developed, religiously protected and highly populated.

That also means those three races have most of the EEZO-rich systems.

4. A Sign of What is to Come

Previously, on the Reclaimer Effect: First Contact

The impossibly loud shouts of agreement filled the ship, and Commander Jill Samson's heart filled with pride at her crew.

They would all die todayâ€|but so would many of the enemy.

As the Nile entered slipspace, the Vaal charged the enemy. _

* * *

><p>"Those people that live in the Ascendancy- most of them, anyway- think that the Mantle is what the Ascendancy is based on. Is it? Imperialism and upholding the Mantle are synonymous if it is, then. Many in the New Terran Alliance and the United Terran Republic are slightly wary of the Ascendancy, especially due to the Ghost Incident. The Protoss, and the Sangheili are officially 'allied' with the Ascendancyâ€|but how long will that last? Many seem to forget that the Unggoy and Kig-Yar were once client races of the Sangheili Imperium, and are now client races of the Ascendancy. If that isn't imperialism, then I don't know what is."- Kaidon Netra'Modan

(Clan Leader of the State of Modan)

* * *

><p>Pacifica, Pacific Ocean
Earth, Sol System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 13, 2614

In the aftermath of the devastating Human-Covenant War (2525-2553, although 2552 is generally widely accepted as the end year), Earth was in ruins, and nearly all of the human outer colonies had been ravaged and burnt down. Reach, one of the industrial pillars of mankind, was gone, and several other important inner colonies had also suffered greatly. Add in the destruction of nearly all the Outer Colonies, and one could wonder how the human race hadn't broken apart after the war.

Of the twenty-five billion deaths (out of sixty-one billion people) suffered during the war, nearly half had occurred on Earth alone. 12.4 billion people had lived on humanity's homeworld, and out of that number, less than three hundred million had survived the darkest hour of the human race.

The catastrophic loss of life on Earth prompted the remnants of the UNSC, and the Ascendancy after it, to vow that never again would the cradle of humanity be ravaged and burned. Cities were rebuilt, with defensive capability in mind. Antiaircraft batteries littered the cities and towns, and military bases were never too far from major metropolises. Massive Anti-Glassing Bunkers capable of holding millions were built. Wide roads allowed for easy transportation of forces, while Heavy Shield Generators were installed in many major cities. A total of five point five billion now repopulated the homeworld, and of that 5.5 billion, nearly a billion alone were military forces. A water-based naval armada was based out of various ports, all armed with Ground-to-Space Weapons Systems.

It was a veritable fortress, much like Reach, and the sheer number of space-borne defenses further proved this as well. Five hundred Orbital Defense Platforms defended Earth alone, in addition to smaller defense satellites that had payloads of nuclear missiles and railguns. Fighter bases built in holed-out asteroids were placed in geosynchronous orbit, capable of mustering two thousand fighter craft and bombers in mere minutes alone.

That was before factoring in the massive Sol Defense Armada, which had nearly 800 warships. Of that number, over four hundred defended Earth and Earth alone, as part of the Earth Defense Fleet. The rest guarded the terraformed world of Mars, along with the Luna Colonies, and other settlements within the Sol System.

The last of these defenses had been completed in 2590. When interviewed about it, Rear Admiral Jeremy Chang, who was tasked with the Mars Defense Fleet, stated that the only thing capable of smashing past all the defenses was a Forerunner fleet.

That reinforced the truth that Earth was the heart of the military might of the Ascendancy.

Politically, Earth was just as important.

The old capital of the UEG had been in Geneva, but Geneva had been

torn apart by the Covenant, and by the end of the war not much had remained of it. To showcase the newfound power of humanity, the civilian leadership of Earth wanted to build a new capital city—but that plan was shelved when the UNSC protested against it— the sheer cost alone in materials could easily be used to build a battlegroup of warships, which would be much more useful at the time, considering the perilous state humanity found itself in.

By the time the Ascendency came into place, the plan, codenamed Pacifica, was initiated. A massive floating city the size of Rhode Island, shining silver in the daylight sun, would be constructed in the Pacific Ocean. Defended by a force of newly constructed Ascendency Water Navy warships, along with a host of airbases and fifty thousand soldiers, the Pacifica would serve as the capital city of the Reclaimer Star Ascendency.

When the Chiss joined, the capital city stayed the same— the Chiss themselves could have cared less for political posturing, especially since they were on the same side, not to mention the war that was raging on at the time.

The center of Pacifica was home to the Capitol Rotunda, a building that served as the home to the Triumvirate, Senate and Assembly, the three political bodies of the Ascendency. On this very day, the Rotunda was packed with every Senator that could physically attend—the others did so through hologram. The three Triumvirs were at their raised platforms, while important members of the AI Assembly took their places at the holographic projectors.

The Senators themselves knew little of what had occurred, and as such listened intently to the military officer who began speaking.

"At approximately 1625 hours of March 11 of the Reclaimer Standard Calendar, the RMS Moscow and her escorts made first contact—"

The silence was deafening, and barely bated breaths were easily heard, more than likely coming from the Senators. A few other muffled curses were thrown around as well, already predicting the bad news.

"—Hostile alien contact. The Keyes-class Frigates RMS Narmada (FFG-344), RMS Parana (FFG-459), and RMS Nile (FFG-464) suffered varying amounts of damage and the Stanforth-class Cruiser RMS Moscow (CG-103) suffered a light amount of damage. The Science Vessel RSS Curious Flames has been confirmed to be destroyed, with Cole Protocol in effect, while the Frigate RMS Vaal (FFG-403) is Missing-in-Action, presumed destroyed as well. As of 0900 hours on March 12 of the Standard Calendar, Red Harvest is in effect."

Before the senators could have said anything, the Supreme Commander of the Reclaimer Ascendency Military Forces and Triumvir of the Military, Grand Admiral Terrence Hood, spoke. His voice was authoritative, and it demanded to be listened to.

"After a brief review of the evidence we have, and by the unanimous decision of the Triumvirate, and with the approval of the Assembly, I hereby declare the state of war existing between the Galactic Reclaimer Star Ascendency of Worlds and her new foes."

This time, the Rotunda burst aloud, Senators demanding things that they themselves actually had no authority to do. The AIs that observed the exchange merely shook their virtual heads, a select few speaking to the Triumvirs as the Senators did what regular politicians did best- waste time.

"Enough!" roared another voice, coming from the Triumvir of the Citizenry, the democratically elected Adjudicator Jan'theor'indeo. "As respectable members of the Ascendency Senate, you _will not_ reveal this to the public until the Triumvirate makes a public statement, which will happen in a few hours. Until then, this information is classified Top Secret, and anyone guilty of leaking such information will be tried, prosecuted and punished as criminals in violation of the Wartime Measures Doctrine of 2575."

The Senators, now made aware of the consequences, became more hushed, and soon enough, began filing out.

The Chiss Adjudicator, only recently elected to the post, slumped down in his seat as the windows in front of the Triumvirate's Platform darkened, a frown clearly visible. Called 'Jan' by his close friends, the new Adjudicator had won the elections in a landslide victory, his honest and humble charm along with prior military and government service making him a good match for playing the role of the political and civilian leader of the Ascendency. He knew that there would be disasters and snafus along the way, but a war? And right after the end of the Second Covenant War, at that? No, he did not expect this to happen-

"Adjudicator," the Councilor of Artificial Intelligences-effectively the leader of the AIs- said in a hushed tone, though she was clearly heard by the Chiss, though he clearly was lost in thought.

"JAN!" the voice of a respected acquaintance, known to the public as Cortana, boomed through his earpiece.

"What is it?" he quickly recovered, mentally beating himself up for losing focus- such a thing was heavily frowned upon in the more strict Chiss society, and had the cultural impression of an airheaded fool.

"We have the latest status reports from Shanxiâ€|General Williams and Governor Leng have prepared as best as they can, and all the civilians that aren't capable of fighting have retreated to the Anti-Glassing Bunkers," she reported in a rapt military fashion. Nearby, Grand Admiral Terrence Hood nodded in appreciation, having heard the report as well. "That was about two or so hours ago."

"Battle Group Infinity is being recalled to New Harvest to be combined with the 1st Strike Armada under Fleet Admiral Lasky, as well as Battle Group Orion, under the command of Rear Admiral Tara Shepard. I've also assigned Battle Group Anubis, under the command of Commodore Cain to assist the fleet; they'll meet up at New Harvest as well. They will be the main force behind the counterattack after they hit Shanxi, since mustering there now would not give us enough forces," Cortana continued. "The 1st Shadow Regiment's 4th and 5th Battalions are loading up to join the force as we speak, though the 3rd Battalion will have to stay on Reach. Spartan Division Golf, the only full Spartan division on Reach, has also loaded up."

The Prime Ascendant, the last member of the Triumvir, who had up till not said nothing, then spoke, his gravelly voice having a mixture of cool calmness, reassurance and firmness.

"Golf is good, they'll do fine as an attack force," the man stated, his specially made uniform standing out. "Anything else-"

"Oh, crapâ€¦" sighed a new voice, this one synthetic as well, though it was decidedly more British in accent. The Vice Councilor of Artificial Intelligences, a veteran of the Human-Covenant War, was named Serina, and aside from Cortana she was the most influential AI 'alive.'

"What is it, Vice Councilor?" prodded the Adjudicator. Despite his misgivings on Serina's sarcastic, near-fatalistic attitude, she was someone you just had to respect/fear, considering her large influence in the Assembly and the Navy.

"I'm afraid that shit has officially hit the fanâ€¦we're going to have to move the public declaration of war forwardâ€¦and we're going to need to do it soon."

* * *

><p>War Room, RMS Orion
_Slipspace, En Route to New Harvest

>Orion Arm
RSC: March 13, 2614

What did we ever do to deserve this?

Tara Shepard was, by nature and necessity, a pragmatic woman. She was an optimist, but not the starry-eyed idealist that was now a dying breed within the human race. Yet, for all her pragmatism, she couldn't help but ask herself the same question over and over again.

Born into a prominent military lineage, she knew from experience and historical truths that most First Contact situations ended in war. Her grandfathers and one of her grandmothers had served in the First Human-Covenant War (commonly referred to as the First Covenant War), all of them gladly putting their lives on the line to defend those who couldn't.

Her parents, several aunts and uncles had also served in the military forces during the Vargr War.

The Zerg had killed her father, Vice Admiral Victor Shepard, during the start of the Koprulu War. She had seen him get torn apart by a Zerg creature that would be named a 'Hydralisk' with her own eyes, before witnessing the slaughter of fifteen more crewmen and crewwomen.

No, it wasn't much of a surprise that she didn't think much of First Contacts.

She had always hoped for a First Contact that didn't involve the two sides shooting at each other first, but that was akin to a blue moon in the present era. Even the Protoss and Chiss First Contacts were made in times of war- the lack of hostility to each other was due to

the need for allies against a mutual foe.

With a remarkable service record spanning from the mid phases of the Koprulu War, to the Second Covenant War, and numerous other successful ops in between had made her somewhat of a famous name within the Navy.

And to think that we just ended another fucking war last yearâ€¦if there's a higher power out there, he, she or it must enjoy yanking us around like thisâ€¦|

The veteran Rear Admiral gave a quiet sigh as she watched the command crew of the RMS _Orion_, a Hood-class Supercarrier (CV-109), file into the 'War Room,' as she had named the unofficial meeting room/lounge that the officers onboard the large aerospace craft carrier used.

As the commanding officer of the Independent Battle Group 15, aka Battle Group Orion, Tara Shepard knew all of the officers onboard her flagship very well. She had trained several of them as protÃ©gÃ©s, and the rest had served alongside her for years, if not decades.

What she knew of the new war that they had been plunged into wasâ€¦|slightly disturbing, to say the least. The enemy used kinetic weapons, which the Reclaimer military starships were actually more vulnerable to than energy weapons. This was due to the focus on shielding technology against energy weapons (which, up till the new foe appeared, was the only type other races used), not kinetic ones. After all, no other faction in known space used kinetic-based weaponry, save for the Terrans (but their lack of shields meant that it was a simple matter to eliminate them if they went to war), and the Terrans were either allied to them or too busy to cause much trouble.

Since the enemy never used kinetic-based weapons in space, there was little point in improving the shields against those types of weapons. Reclaimer energy shielding technology had progressed much in the past half-century, so much that if a Keyes-class Frigate from the current day and age had been the standard for the human fleet during the First Covenant War, the Covenant would have been bloodied, repelled, and possibly defeated.

Improving the shielding systems against kinetic weapons wasn't that hard, of course, considering that learning how to make and maintain the shields was the harder issue in the first place. Now that they understood the principles, it was surprisingly easy to improve on shield systems. The major problem, however, was power.

It was glaringly obvious that due to the improvements on human technology- the reloading speed of the MAC, the addition of shields and the higher resistance to energy weapons, as well as the newer Slipspace drives- human warships needed more power. In fact, the main reason for the Charon-class Light Frigates being retired after the First Covenant War was due to the lack of power to simultaneously have an improved MAC reloading and firing rate, a shield, and a new Slipspace drive (the last ate up much, much more power than even the Covenant one during the war). This was why the newer class of Frigates was slightly larger than the older class- to make room for the Shield Generators, Power Generators, and other systems needed to

maintain them.

There was also enough power to increase the shield's resistance against energy weapons, but not against the kinetic ones as well at the same time. Changing it from energy to kinetic resistance was relatively simple, but would require time in a shipyard, something the _Orion_ didn't have time for. In any case, it was a Carrier, so if their shields were being taxed then they were probably screwed anyway.

Hindsight, in this case, was truly 20/20.

Or, in Tara Shepard's more uncouth terms, hindsight was a bitch.

And they would have to make do with it, as they had always done before.

As the last of the officers needed to form a battle plan for the Battle Group filed in, she gave off another unnoticed sigh.

Here we go again.

* * *

><p>Cipritine
Palaven, Trebia System
>Apien Crest, Perseus Arm
RSC: March 13, 2614

"I find it strange, though," Primarch Loren Valorus of the Nova Vestin Cluster stated in a conversational tone, before explaining it. "The Asari have always strove for peaceful relations withâ€|well, everyone! Even the spirits-damned Batarians! Why this race?"

"The AIs?" suggested Primarch Antonus Quinn of the Azeri Cluster, looking around at the few who had arrived extremely early to the convening of the Hierarchy Primarch Council. "The Asari were the ones who passed the law, and they did so before the Geth even existed."

A slam on the table by two older talons quieted the discussion. "It doesn't matter! The Asari Republics have just formed a unified military command, and the last time they did that was during the Krogan Rebellions!"

Silence filled the room for a moment. The Turian who had slammed the table then stood up. "Like it or not, the peace-loving Asari have begin waging war on this new foe. This is the first time we've seen them unite under a single banner since the Geth Uprising against the Quarians. And I don't need to remind you about how intense the decade after the Uprising was."

Another brief silence ensued, before another Turian, this one with the rank of a Navy Admiral, spoke up.

"I do not mean to sound like a Salarianâ€|but we have little to no information regarding these new beings. They evidently have a new FTL method of unknown capability- one that they _weaponized_- and their cruisers have cannons with yields higher than that of the _Destiny Ascension_. Their only weakness seems to be their range, but their micro FTL jumps make that a nonissue," the Admiral continued. "They have shields with unusually high amounts of power, and the armor on their cruisers are nearly as strong as the ones on our

Dreadnoughts."

"Supreme Admiral Destrius, you make it sound like we are outmatched," stated an Army General who had just entered the room.

"That's because we most likely are outmatched, technologically-wise. We don't know their ground warfare capabilities, but what we do know of their space-based ones isâ€¦concerning," Supreme Admiral Jovar Destrius stated in a serious tone. "I do not underestimate the Hierarchy's might, but neither do I underestimate the potential might of our enemy. The lack of Element Zero alone should not discount the potential power these new beings can wield, and like it or not, they are more than capable of at least matching our forces in space."

"In any case," interrupted the Primarch of Palaven as he strode into the room, all the other Turians immediately saluting as soon as they saw him, "the Turian Hierarchy doesn't have much of a choice in the matter."

A few moments of discussion continued, before the last few Primarchs and important military officials took their places.

"How many?" demanded the Primarch Aderi Falconus of Palaven, effectively the head of state for the Turian Hierarchy. The table he was at the head of had the most powerful Turians in the galaxy sitting around it.

"The diversionary attacks on the other systems containing a 'Reclaimer' presence were successful, and they managed to split the fleet that was supposed to defend the homeworld-" the Hierarchy Military Intelligence Corps Colonel, Primus Vakarian, was cut off there by the Primarch Falconus.

"Colony."

"Sir?" a confused Navy Admiral inquired.

"It's not their homeworld, it's a colony," Falconus stated in a calm tone. "The estimated population level of the world doesn't exceed twenty million, and the combined population of the colonists in the nearby systems only adds a few million more. For an advanced spacefaring race to have less than a billion people would beâ€¦unlikely."

The others conceded the fact to their leader, seeing the logic in the argument.

"In any case, Operation Crimson Blade was a partial success. The composition of the forces sent on the diversionary attacks were Asari, Salarian and a mix of the other Associate naval fleets," Colonel Vakarian continued.

"How is that a partial success, Colonel Vakarian?" another Turian, this one with a General's stripes, demanded, emphasizing the word 'colonel,' as if to remind Vakarian of his lower rank. The others at the table somewhat expected it. Hierarchy Blackwatch General Desolas Arterius was known to have had a rivalry (for reasons unknown to most) with Primus Vakarian for ages.

"The enemy naval forces were spread out to most of the worlds due to the first few attacks. While this allowed for the success in leaving their main colony undefended, it also caused the failure of most of the other attacks," a small grimace appeared Intelligence Corps Colonel's face at that moment, "most notably the Asari Tevura-class Dreadnought _Sunlight Glory_ and the 145th Flotilla of the Salarian Naval Armada."

Silence filled the room for a short moment right after that, broken by General Arterius, who recovered first.

"How in the _spirits_' name did these aliens destroy a dreadnought?"

To everyone's great surprise, Colonel Vakarian didn't seem fazed. "Superior firepower. The initial engagement between the Joint Patrol Fleet Theta and the Reclaimer flotilla at Relay 314, despite numerical superiority on our side, ended with seven Hierarchy frigates, one Hierarchy cruiser, five Asari frigates, and one Asari cruiser destroyed, in addition to four Turian frigates, three Asari frigates and a single Asari cruiser damaged. The Asari Tevura-class dreadnought _Sunset Hazel_ also suffered moderate amounts of damage."

The Hierarchy Primarch Council was the one and only ruling force within the Turian Hierarchy. Composed of the leaders of each Colonization Cluster, and led by the Primarch of Palaven, the Primarch Council _was_ the Hierarchy. Each and every one of them had served their race with loyalty and honor for decades, at the very least. And all of them didn't get there by being dumb either.

These were smart people, and they clearly saw the facts.

"_Spirits_," another Hierarchy Army General cursed. "That many losses, just for damaging three cruisers, a dreadnought and destroying a single cruiser and a noncombatant vessel?"

A grave look crossed Primarch Falconus' face. "I cannot stress this enough to all of you. This new enemy is one that more than likely outguns us, and might just be the single greatest threat to our existence, whether we wanted it or not. General Arterius, I'm authorizing the deployment of Blackwatch units to the new battlefrontâ€¦gather whatever intelligence we can, and make sure that the enemy prisoners, if there are any, are treated with some form of respect. If all goes well, we'll have a new client race, new technology, and it's in our best interest to make sure they won't be too hostile."

Nervous chuckles from all around the table filled the air, knowing all too well how likely it would be for that to happen.

Spirits help us if the worst happens.

* * *

><p>Captain's Cabin, RMS Anubis
Prospect (High Orbit), _Zeta Ariadne System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 13, 2614

It was a dark cavern, with the sound of skittering creatures being echoed repeatedly by the walls. Saying that it was disturbing was an understatement of the century, and saying that it was cause enough for fear was something that Captain Helena Cain and her surviving naval crewmen could agree with. Armored in the Naval Shipboard Combat Skins (which were wholly inadequate against even a Zergling) the crewmen and crewwomen of the RMS Elbe had crash-landed on the worst place they could have.

Char.

The Marine and ODST detachment onboard the Elbe had mostly been deployed to assist with Commander Raynor's Alliance forces' push into the Central Hive. The last of the ODST Pods had been launched when a massive swarm of Scourges and Mutalisks came upon the Elbe, the 'suicidal flying bombs' of the Swarm (the Scourges) depleting the shields of the Elbe. More Scourges and Zerg flyers soon reinforced the Mutalisks, and soon the armor of the Elbe had been pierced.

The damage done was severe enough that the Elbe could not escape into the upper atmosphere, and was forced to make a vicious crash-landâ€|right atop of a minor Hive.

Minor indicated a small one, but the Zerg didn't do 'small.' Instead of millions of Zerg, the crew of the Elbe would only need to contend with hundreds of thousands.

'_How fortunate,' Cain thought with a snort as she assisted the other crewmen with setting up barricades, machine gun emplacements and landmines. A few New Terran Alliance Marines that had been onboard at the time were lugging mortars and salvaged railguns from the downed frigate to a suitable location. Judging by the fact that there were more than a few hundred ships crashed on the surface of Char, it wasn't likely that a rescue would come soon. Most of the allied forces had been deployed to the Central Hive FOB anyway, to ensure that the Artifact had a chance to do what it was supposed to and wipe out all the non-Overmind Zerg near the Central Hive, so that the Strike Force would be able to plant the beacons and nuke the Zerg Overmind to kingdom come._

The slight shaking of the ground then snapped her out of her daydream. A shaking ground on Char could only mean one thing.

"_Incoming Zergling rush!" roared an NTA Marine as he fired the machine gun from the emplacement he had been assigned to. Crewmen fired the mortars as accurately as they could, tearing apart tens of Zerg with each shot. Yet all veterans of conflicts with the Zerg would know that tens, hundreds or even thousands of casualties were small potatoes for the Zerg. They were inconsequential losses, and the continued charge of the demonic purplish creatures only reinforced the fact._

"_Fire, fire!" cried out a naval Chief Petty Officer as she tossed an incendiary grenade into the midst of the charging Zerglings, the nearby members of the Naval Combat Team 6794 firing their heavy machine guns and rifles at the seemingly endless horde. _

_Then the first of the Zerg hit the landmines. Beautiful explosions

of yellow and red replaced the purple horde of devilsâ€¦for a short moment. The NTA Marines had continued firing into the unseen horde, and the naval crewmen and crewwomen soon followed. The railguns salvaged from the Elbe fired into the swarm of hostile creatures and blew them up with contemptuous ease, but the sheer numbers of the enemy negated any effect it might have had._

The Zergling charge then suddenly withered down and died as more lead was poured into them. A few Naval Combat Teams armed with the Directed Energy Sniper Rifles began firing, each shot collecting a single kill, sometimes even killing two or three Zerglings at once.

The ground then seemed to shake even moreâ€¦

From the north came a wave of banelings, the sickly green bulbous forms of the creatures reminding the Reclaimers of the Flood. The NTA Marines grimaced as they focused their fire on the banelings that would explode when they were near enough for their acid to melt through the strongest armor.

From the south came a horde of more Zerglings, rushing towards them, with hydralisks firing their poisonous spines at the defenders. The snipers concentrated on these deadly hydralisks, letting the machine gunners handle the zerglings. To the east, the skies parted to allow a force of Mutalisks, but the salvaged point defense lasers of the Elbe handled these. Then, when hope arose that the Zerg might be defeated, the ground exploded.

_A massive worm-like creature literally pushed the ground up, and gave off a fearsome screech. But the worm itself was not the immediate threat. The Zerglings and Roaches it spewed out were. Zerglings could easily be brought down by rifle fire, but the armored hides of the Roaches proved troublesome for the under-armed naval crewmen and crewwomen. _

Cries of pain and agony filled the air as Roach Acid and Zergling claws tore through the ranks of the crew, butchering the loyal and honorable warriors who served their race with pride.

And Helena Cain could only watch helplessly as she fired her light machinegun at the enemy horde, the surviving members of her crew retreating to higher ground where more emplacements had been set.

The attack tapered down after that, and as night fell, only minor Zerg incursions occurred. The despair from the slaughter mere hours ago was replaced with the grim determination to survive.

"_Abura Kazarnâ€¦the will to survive" the Chiss Lieutenant who served as the XO of the Elbe had said during this time. _

Then, the same deep, haunting voice boomed, as the same Chiss Lieutenant was burnt to death by acid. Screams of anguish echoed from the dying in the soot-filled air, and Cain watched helplessly.

"_**Fools. You will not survive this, you will die! And you, Captain Cain," an invisible sneer could be heard when Cain's voice was called, "shall watch them scream and die!"**_

The woman jolted out of the bed, panting heavily as she relived the worst experience she had lived through. Over five hundred men and women had survived the crash-landing of the RMS _Elbe_, but in the three days they had been down there, their numbers were whittled down to a mere seven.

In the aftermath of the Battle of Char, Captain Helena Cain was promoted to Commodore, and soon after, Rear Admiral. Her meteoric rise to Rear Admiral was also clouded by a series of brutal actions that might have been classified as war crimes, had they not ended up resulting in decisive victories for the Ascendancy, and eventually these 'black marks' caused her demotion back to Commodore. Had she not been such a valuable military genius and strategic resource, she would have most definitely been dishonorably discharged.

She was a woman to be respected and feared, but from her current state, one could question that.

Her momentary ponderings were interrupted by an alert message to her wrist-mounted PSI-Band, which allowed her to tap into the Psionic Network and the military-exclusive MILNET.

With a sigh, she brought it up, the light blue holographic screen being expanded and scanned through by Cain's Optical Implants (something she had to get after a Zergling's claw managed to tear out one of her eyes).

* * *

><p>BEGIN<p>

Priority Alpha Level Transmission

From: Grand Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole (RSN), Reclaimer Military HIGHCOM

Commodore Cain, this Transmission is a formal order to take command of the Independent Battle Group 27 and set course for New Harvest, whereupon arrival you will join the First Strike Armada and IBG-15, and wait for the arrival of IBG-1, before commencing Operation PEGASUS.

Details regarding Operation PEGASUS will be made available for your perusal. Good luck, and godspeed.

END Priority Alpha Level Transmission

* * *

><p>Armali
Thessia, Parnitha System
>Athena Nebula, Scutum-Crux Arm
RSC: March 13, 2614

The Matriarch Council was the obscure seat of power behind the seemingly free and democratic Asari Republics. Representing the two hundred fifty colonies within the Republics and the hundreds of outposts were a mere thirty-five Matriarchs, each wielding a ridiculous amount of power within galactic politics and economy. The speaker at the moment was one of their most powerful and ruthless members, Matriarch Ilya Sederis. While a shrewd businesswoman, she

largely stayed out of the limelight due to her line of work.

"This new race is a clear and present threat to galactic stability. As the leaders and pioneers of this stability, it is in our interests to end the menace before it ever can begin," the old (even by Asari standards) Matriarch said in a forceful tone. "The Protheans have left many warnings, the most important one being the dangers of AI. The Quarian _suit rats_ learned that the hard way, after ignoring our wise counsel."

The use of the racist term surprised no one, considering that nearly everyone with a modicum of power in the Asari society knew of the Matriarch's hate for the Quarian race due to a 'violation' of mining rights, which happened multiple times. It was a mutual feeling between the Migrant Fleet and House Sederis, so most of the Matriarchs in the Council ignored it.

"Is it not possible to make peace with this new race?" interrupted another Asari Matriarch, this one of the Lower House Kaleus. "They might even have succeeded in controlling the AIs."

"Don't be a fool," responded Sederis with a derisive snort. "The Protheans, the most advanced race we know of, couldn't do so. The Quarrians, while a plague to the galaxy, are masters at technology, and they didn't have the capabilities as well. What makes you think that these newcomers do?"

"Their technology is advanced too, Matriarch Sederis," interjected Matriarch Binna Dantius of the Upper House Dantius. "It would be unwise to think them primitiveâ€¦"

"They do not even have EEZO tech!" snorted Matriarch Tola Janiris of the Lower House Janiris. "All advanced tech requires EEZO, even the _Vorcha_ know that."

"We don't know how advanced their technology is," pointed out another Matriarch, one from the Lower House of Valis. "Making assumptions based on the lack of Element Zero is a foolish thing."

The hidden message was there. 'You're a fool.'

Before Matriarch Valis' comment could start up another hostile House-to-House confrontation, Matriarch Benezia T'Soni intervened.

"Quiet!"

The tone in which the Matriarch of one of Thessia's most influential families spoke would be chilling to most, sending shivers down some of the present Matriarchs' spinesâ€¦not that they would admit it.

"Advanced or not, there is little question as to whether they are deadly," she continued after the silent pause. "The loss of several warships, in addition to a Dreadnought, is proof of it, whether we like it or not."

The pregnant pause afterwards was soon seized by Matriarch Sederis as she saw a way to gain more influence.

"To that end, the Eclipse Private Security Force will deploy half of its Corporate Assault Fleets and a quarter of the Eclipse ground forces in aiding Asari forces," she stated in a matter-of-fact manner, her genius intellect allowing her to improvise upon such plans and use it to her advantage.

With luck, Eclipse and House Sederis will gain this newcomer's technologies as wellâ€|

* * *

><p>Xin Taiyuan
Shanxi, Theta Majoris System
>Orion Arm
RSC: March 13, 2614

It was barely dawn. The sunrise on Shanxi had long been considered a marvelous view, making it an up-and-coming hotspot for tourism, especially considering the colony's location in the 'safe' zone. Fewer than sixteen and a half million people lived on the beautiful planet, and other than several smaller issues, life was good for them, and more importantly for the eighteen year-old Pavel Ivanovich Petrenko, life was good for _him_.

Of course, that all changed today.

The labored breaths of Serviceman Third Class Pavel Ivanovich Petrenko were hard to hear, given the amount of gunfire and explosions filling the air. The human fired a wild burst from his SBR-11 at the supposed location of the enemy, hoping that there would be friendlies nearby to help him out from the situation that he was stuck in. The rifle that rightfully held a respected place in the gun industry for being reliable and accurate (with a good amount of firepower too) spat out a stream of artificially accelerated rounds, set to explode when they hit a solid object. A series of small 'pops' came from whatever the weapon hit, though it was easily drowned out by the sheer loudness of the SBR-11's firing.

It was good that the weapon was this loud as well. At least no one would be able to listen to Petrenko's incessant cursing in Russian. Not that it mattered much, considering the deceased state of his Colonial Defense Force squad.

It happened so fast, the eighteen year old thought as he fumbled with the magazine that he was supposed to reload, managing to plug in the new magazine after several inexperienced and shaky tries. As he took a deep breath and steeled his nerves, he couldn't help but wonder at how a peaceful colony prospering away from all the fronts of war could turn into a hellish warzone. Granted, it wasn't as bad as it could have been, but war was hell no matter how it was waged.

Rumors had spread ever since several heavily damaged Navy warships returned from their supposedly 'harmless' scouting/exploration duties in the nearby system. The next day, an official statement was released, with the promise of a shitload of reinforcements from the rest of Ascendancy space.

Reinforcements that would take too long to arrive.

Mere hours after that, the shit hit the fanâ€|and splattered all over his face. A veritable armada of alien warships began arriving into

the system, sweeping through the small Colonial Defense Force flotilla stationed in orbit, along with the two ODPs. From what the scattered reports could get out, they had made ET bleed badly for each CDF personnel killed. The sheer numbers of the alien force, however, meant that there were ample amounts of alien soldiers coming down.

His squad was a newly graduated one, all of them fresh-faced and inexperienced. The local Army garrison (a half-strength Division) had managed to tie down a portion of the invaders in one of Shanxi's main cities (Xin Cheng), but the capital city, Xin Taiyuan, was largely empty of any 'official' military forces, with only a small CDF battalion to provide any form of defense. This was due to the fact that Xin Cheng was the main military base of operations on Shanxi, while Xin Taiyuan was the administrative capital.

In any case, it mattered little now.

Unlike the Army or Marines, Colonial Defense Force troops were mostly made of conscripts. Despite being 'trained' in warfare, these weren't necessarily the men and women that had the mindset for a battlefield. Their role reflected that. If CDF troops had to be used, it meant that things were going really, really bad. Practically none had experience in combat duties, and the CDF Ground Armor was rather pitiful when compared to those used by the Army and Marines.

Weak shields and thin armor provided them some form of protection from the alien invaders, and while their shields did seem to be effective against the strange weaponry utilized by the aliens, the projectile weapons the enemy used were far superior in terms of armor-penetration, though this was in regards to CDF Ground Armor.

The rest of the squad could have vouched for that—if they were alive. Then again, they wouldn't be able to vouch for that had they been alive, so—

A burst from one of the invaders peppered the impromptu barricade he had hunkered down behind, some of the rounds penetrating and rendering parts of his cover into Swiss cheese.

"Son of a whore!" exclaimed Petrenko as he gaped at the hole that resulted from a round punching through it—and it was uncomfortably close to him.

More rounds started peppering the barricade, some of them punching through as well, ruining more of the already trashed convenience store that had been turned into a battlefield.

The CDF soldier/militiaman let loose another uncontrolled burst, but all he managed to do was force some of the invaders down, which wasn't really helpful, considering that the rest of the invaders were now able to fire right at him.

The weakened shields on his Armor gave out as soon as the first few bursts hit him. An observer trained in the arts of war would have remarked upon the invaders' discipline under fire, along with their teamwork. Petrenko, however, could only curse as he managed to leap behind a sofa, providing a reprieve, no matter how brief it would be.

And then...

Weightlessness. That was the only way Petrenko could describe it. The panicked eyes of the militiaman caught the bluish glow surrounding him, his mind unable to comprehend what was occurring at the moment.

The darting eyes managed to spot the probable source of this glow, an astonishingly humanlike alien, who was also surrounded by the blue aura. It exuded power and elegance. Petrenko, who had realized that he was now up in the open, somehow being levitated into the air, began to feel fear finally creeping up to him, the adrenaline rush wearing off.

In the span of the few seconds this had happened, another alien, this one not at all like the blue-humanlike one, raised the rifle in his hands (or talons?).

The last thing Serviceman Third Class Pavel Ivanovich Petrenko saw was the smug smirk on the blue humanlike alien's face. After that, it all went dark.

* * *

><p>"The reason for the Ascendency having a law that states that no pre-spaceflight races should be contacted is simple. The cultural aftereffect of First Contact situations with Extraterrestrial Races is a well-documented thing. The Vargr-Mon Calamari First Contact is an example of a worst-case scenario, similar to that of Humanity and the Covenant's. The Chiss-Mon Calamari First Contact, for example, was what we can refer to as a best-case scenario. These were two interstellar races with the mindset for coexistence, if not cooperation. That having been said, the Mon Calamari-Chiss First Contacts would result in quite a few periods of tense negotiations, due to the 'fear of the unknown.' Now, these were culturally and technologically advanced races- their mindset, in our point of view, has little to no 'barbaric' traits, and their tech bases were similar. Contact between a less advanced race (in terms of technology and cultural development) and a more advanced one- especially if there is a massive difference- will result in a disaster for the less advanced race. It could be through war, where the reason for the disaster is evident. Alternatively, it could be that they would be culturally stunted. They would not have the time, nor capability, to build up their own distinct cultural identity, and in terms of Extraterrestrials and Interstellar Relations, this is a very bad thing."- Section Director Katarina Schmidt, Reclaimer Directorate of Intelligence Section Three (Public Relations)

* * *

><p>AN: I'M BACK BOYS! WHO MISSED ME?<p>

Before you guys start picking up the shotguns and Molotov cocktails, I need you boys and girls to listen. Now, the issue of shields on human warships _after_ the war was widely debated before Halo 4 came out.

In my opinion, the reason why Covenant ships that had capital ship-grade shields were always above a kilometer long was due to the

larger power sources they'd need to power their shields, energy weapons, and Slipspace drives, and as such they had better generators to go with it.

Keep in mind that Covenant tech was reverse-engineered, and as such is far, far more inferior to Forerunner tech. When humanity gained the Janus Keys, and through them, the locations of the location of Forerunner artifacts, we managed (in this piece of fiction, at least) to reverse-engineer a more improved version of the Slipspace drives, and shields.

Note that I used LOCATIONS- just because they know a Forerunner artifact is on a planet doesn't mean they know exactly where on a planet it is, and despite what you might think, finding Forerunner artifacts isn't exactly easy. Look at the Portal! It was on Earth, it wasn't hidden under the ocean, and we didn't find it UNTIL THE COVENANT DID IT FOR US!

The shields gained from this scientific endeavor were then improved upon to have a higher resistance against energy weapons, considering that the enemy humanity faced only used energy weapons. This is taxing enough as it is on the power generators, especially those onboard Frigates and Destroyers (both about the same size), since they are much smaller. Add in the strain of the newer, more powerful and power-hungry Slipspace drives, and faster reloading and faster firing of the MAC, and you can see why the scientists didn't think it was worth it to improve resistance to kinetic weapons.

Now that they do know of new enemies who use kinetic weapons, howeverâ€¦|you can guess, right?

* * *

><p>Next: I've been replaying Mass Effect 2 and 3, and I realized something. In ground combat, Mass Effect troops are far better than Halo troops during the Human-Covenant Warâ€¦|<p>

Don't get me wrong, a SPARTAN will beat the crap out of any unit from Mass Effect (they might run into a bit of a small issue at Asari commandos, Geth Colossi and actual Reapers thoughâ€¦|a bit), but there are only so many SPARTANs.

Your average Mass Effect infantryman has access to Kinetic Barriers, Medi-Gel, and a whole set of 'powers.' The average 'Soldier' can will themselves into an artificial Adrenaline Rush, which allows for a short moment of time in which they will react faster. Like Spartan Time, but less advanced. They also have some genetic enhancement, increasing their strength, though again, it doesn't come close to a Spartan's. The fact that ALL soldiers have it thoughâ€¦|

And the armor! Some armor can increase the user's strength (though this is customized, so I don't think the average infantryman has it), though I doubt they'll reach a Spartan's level.

Also, Mass Accelerator small arms is superior to most Halo projectile small arms in Armor Piercing capabilities. This is why. A shot from an MA5 series rifle will hit a kinetic barrier or shield with the same amount of force as one from a Mass Accelerator. The difference, of course, is the SIZE of the round. The Mass Accelerator delivers the same amount of force onto a smaller area. Naturally, this will

increase armor piercing capabilities, as the force is more focused. On shields or barriers, however, there shouldn't be a difference. Then again, Mass Accelerators can change ammo types with a flick of a button (Incendiary, Armor Piercing, Disruptor, Cryo, Warp).

Halo troops, on the other hand, use similar equipment to what the US military uses nowadays (discounting ODSTs and Spartans). While it is more advanced than our currently used gear, the lack of shields/kinetic barriers doesn't help much. In addition to that, bio-gel, as we can agree, is inferior to Medi-Gel (Medi-Gel doesn't hurt like a bitch when applied, and has the same properties and purposes).

It's just my opinion, however. PM me if you want to have a civilized debate about it! Also, I would like to request some Original Space Factions, sent through a PM.

Format:

Faction Name: (Example) Dog Federation

Faction Government: (Example) Democracy (officially), de jure Military Dictatorship

Faction Capital World/City (if they do not have a whole planet): (Example) Dog World (population: 4.1 billion) or Dog City (population: 1 million)

Important Worlds/Cities (use cities only if they do not have an entire planet): (Example) Dog World 2 (Important Industrial Colony) or Dog City Bravo (Important Agricultural City)

Faction Species: (Example) Uplifted Golden Retrievers

Faction Behavior: (Example) Isolationist

Faction Size: (Example) 2 Planets (state amount of planets/colonies controlled by faction, or state the size of the faction's territory if they do not have an entire planet)

Faction Technology: (Example) Spaceflight (pre-FTL). Options are: Pre-Industrial (you'll have to include a more detailed explanation in the PM), Industrial Age (has factories), Pre-Spaceflight (no space shuttles yet), Spaceflight (can go to a moon, no FTL), Interstellar (has FTL). Explain their tech level in detail.

Faction Military: (Example) Dog Federation Starfleet (Space Navy), Federation Army (defense of the nation), Federation Marines (offensive duties), Federation Intelligence Agency (intelligence agency)

Faction Leader: (Example) Glorious, Democratically Elected, Honorable, Supreme President for Life Doge (if you are making up your own title, please explain if it is for males/females/unisex)

Faction Bio: (Example) The Dog Federation is a government spanning two separate planets in the Doggy System. Ruled by a tyrannic oppressive ruler, who overthrew the previous (corrupt) government in a deadly coup, the Federation seeks to control the lives of their citizens, while slowly expanding. (Explain more in your

bio)

IMPORTANT: Your Original Factions can be human, human-alien (like the Asari or Chiss), alien, or Cthulu's great-grandmother. It's your choice.

* * *

><p>THANK YOU!<p>

End
file.